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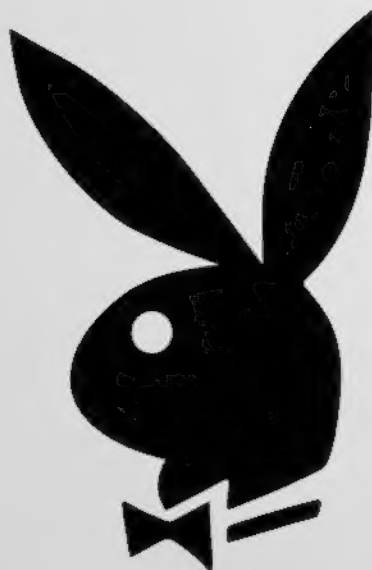
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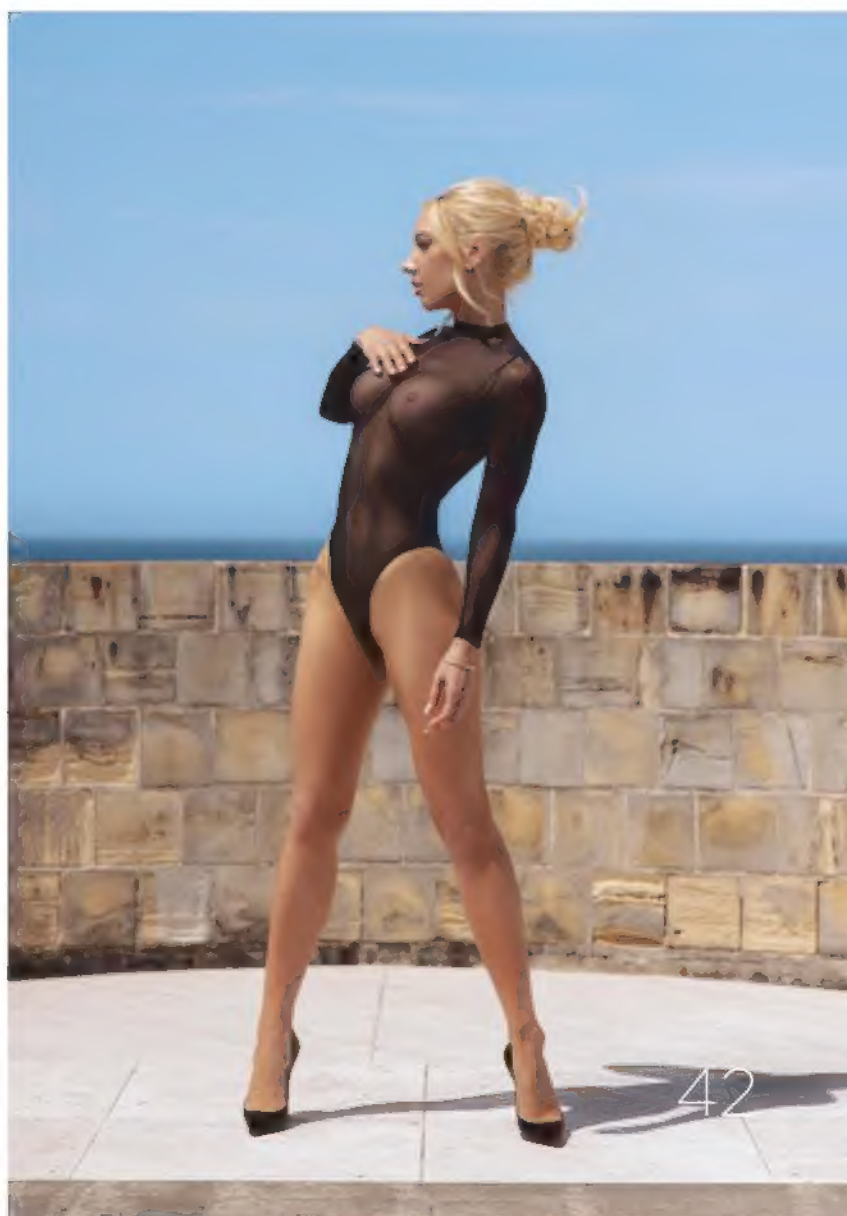
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CONTENTS

- 06 **MAN IN HIS DOMAIN: ORVILLE PECK**
Mask aside, the crooning cowboy has nothing to hide
- 20 **STYLE: STERLING FOR ALL**
Actor turned producer Sterling K. Brown talks representation while flaunting his natural swag
- 28 **LET'S PLAY: EMILIA ORTIZ**
Forget chicken soup. This millennial bruja champions witchcraft for the soul
- 32 **RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNICATION**
We talk about why "talking about" things in a relationship is very important
- 36 **PLAYBOY HERITAGE**
Class of 1950
- 52 **GUEST ADVISOR: SHAN BOODRAM**
Intimacy insights from the YouTube-slaying sexpert
- 56 **PORTRAITS FOR THE PEOPLE**
Two art-world insiders, JR and Jerry Saltz, discuss the former's epochal new work
- 74 **SYMPOSIUM: COME TO YOUR SENSES**
Two filmmakers, a pair of foodies and an orgasm aficionado take us on a sensory adventure. With photography by Maurizio Di Iorio
- 92 **SYMPOSIUM: SEX, CINEMA AND THE FEMALE GAZE**
What makes a great sex scene in 2020? The Black List's Kate Hagen zooms in

- 12 **PICTORIAL**
EMILY ALEXANDRA GUGLIELMO
- 42 **ON THE COVER**
CANDICE KANE
- 66 **PICTORIAL**
CRISTAL
- 84 **PICTORIAL**
TATIANA IVANOVA
- ISSUE**
No 85 | January 2025





PLAYBOY

ORVILLE

The man behind the mask has a voice of gold and nothing to hide. What will it take for a hidebound genre to embrace the new cowboy in town?

BY **MARISSA R. MOSS**





Man in His Domain

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALYSSE GAFKJEN

The aptly named “party switch” featured in every room at the Dive Motel in Nashville has four options: sex, drugs, rock & roll and sleep. Orville Peck, in a pair of horse-print tighty-whities, is boogying to the sex station, which blasts 1970s R&B while a rotating disco ball shimmers in sparkly pink hues overhead. The lack of a television, plus the bright geometric wallpaper and deep shag carpeting, signals that this renovated roadside inn isn’t the kind of place you visit for a family-friendly good time. But on this sweaty Tennessee afternoon the only thing splayed across the bed sheets is Peck’s collection of handmade lace-up masks. Gold fringe, long red fringe, short cream fringe, mid-length pink fringe. Fringe galore, yee-haw, amen.

Peck fastens on one of his masks — which he hopes never to be seen in public without — pairing it with an embroidered Nudie-style suit. Someone suggests we crank up the party switch to drugs, which features trippy lights and sounds by hip-hop forefather Grandmaster Flash. The country artist is pleased, mostly with his outfit.

“I do like the Porter Wagoner look,” Peck says, referring to the 1960s twangy crooner who made sparkly, chain-stitched getups part of his signature look. Wagoner, however — at least as far as we know — never cracked a whip while listening to “White Lines.” The musician moves to another bedroom, this one featuring side-by-side bathtubs and more shag, to snap additional photos. He stands on a bed and gives a hearty crack to a long, vintage-leather lasso.

“I’m good with a whip,” the superhero-like figure announces, an innuendo that would no doubt cause fidgeting across town on Music Row, the epicenter of Nashville’s commercial country-music industry. While fluid sexuality has long been embraced in pop music, the naughtiest images to ship out of this town tend toward a tight pantsed Luke Bryan singing about “knockin’ boots.” For someone like Peck, who is openly gay, a career in mainstream country has almost always been out of reach. Just seven years ago, in 2013, country radio penalized Kacey Musgraves for alluding to kissing girls on “Follow Your Arrow”; the song never charted higher than 43 on *Billboard*’s Country Airplay chart despite being named song of the year at the 2014 Country Music Association Awards. The genre, conventional wisdom would like you to believe, is conservative, and the only viable path for an aspiring artist who happens to embrace gayness is country-adjacent. But times are changing. Nashville is starting to demand a party switch.

“See,” Peck says, flicking the whip in an impressive wave motion with a controlled snap of the wrist, all cowboy confident, “I told y’all.”

Peck, who put out his debut LP, *Pony*, on Sub Pop in March, sings about relationships with men because that’s who he is, not because he has an agenda. The sexiness in his songs comes more from a sonic palette that sometimes sounds like Chris Isaak than from character-playing. Much has been murmured about Peck’s sexuality and his “subversive” role in country; almost as much has been made of his masked anonymity. All three aspects are captivating, for sure, but they represent a fraction of the whole: Peck speaks about being a gay man in country music not to spur a revolution but to find a role for folks like him in a genre that, historically, hasn’t



been welcoming. If anything, he's a traditionalist at heart. Dolly Parton and Wagoner are his North Stars in a cosmos that also includes Merle Haggard. And no, Orville Peck isn't his real name, but no one makes a stink about Eillean Regina Edwards, the woman we know as Shania Twain.

His photo shoot done, Peck, now in a T-shirt on the hotel patio, smokes a cigarette through his fringe, which is parted down the middle like a set of curtains. "I'm not setting out to be an instigator," he says. "In fact, my songwriting is probably more in line with traditional country than a lot of country now."

He's not wrong: Peck's songs don't imitate Haggard's per se, but neither do those of the subgenre that includes Sam Hunt and Florida Georgia Line crooning about women, pickup trucks and beer. When compared toe-to-toe with the brocountry groups that dominate popular radio, Peck is no more indie rock than

they are hip-hop. But a fear lingers that queer singers like Peck are trying to warp country into another liberal bastion. Peck doesn't see it as a changing of the guard so much as an opportunity to be a part of what's been built.

Country's queens, Parton, in particular, were Peck's inspiration and role models, but he soon realized the genre as a whole wasn't ready to invite him in; it's an experience that's relatable for many people whose stories have been excluded from the country canon. It's not that people of color or queer people haven't had a role in Nashville's understructure; it's that their impacts have been diminished and muted. This isn't entirely the fault of country music itself. As Nadine Hubbs discusses in *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, classism has resulted in the dismissal of country as the province of unsophisticated hillbillies.

"Even just a few banjo or fiddle notes," Hubbs writes, "can suffice to convey qualities including rusticity, Southernness, stupidity or lack of sophistication, and violent bigotry, especially racism and homophobia." When the middle and elite classes use the refrain "anything but country" to describe their musical interests, they're signaling not just personal taste but economic background and political affinity. Classifying country music as the antithesis of sophistication promotes the idea that it can't be appreciated by anyone who lacks white skin and a blue collar.

"I think the stigma that country music is made by a certain type of person, and is only for a certain type of person, is something perpetuated by big-wig old white men who run record labels and feel like that's how they can keep in control," says Peck, stubbing out his cigarette. "But look at Willie Nelson. That guy's a weed-smoking gay-rights activist."

"The problem is less about homophobia. It's a chauvinist problem."



The issue of otherness in country is further highlighted in the case of Lil Nas X, who came out as gay following the success of his 2019 hit, "Old Town Road." After he was nominated for a Country Music Association Award (for musical event of the year), a flood of national headlines erroneously declared him the first openly gay person to snag such an honor. In the past decade, openly gay artists Shane McAnally and Brandy Clark have been recognized by the CMAs. The media's lazy assumption speaks to the view of country as a "hillbilly" home where there can't possibly be space for queer folks, resulting in erasure by accident. Country's gay community hasn't always been heard, but it is rich, and critics often confuse the Music Row machine and country radio where queer voices are indeed silenced with the music makers themselves.

As the world considers more interpretations of sexuality and gender, and country music becomes a global commodity that needs to react to those trends, there's space in the expanding universe for a star like Peck. "Whether they even recognize the reasoning, I think a lot of gay people feel detached from country music," he says. "But marginalized people of any kind have to bushwhack and blaze our own trails a lot of the time. Those paths aren't there for us, and it's usually in the face of a lot of adversity or a lot of judgment."

It's a complicated balance to recognize the role queer people have played in country music and also acknowledge how they've been curbed. Peck knows this history well, from Lavender Country, the band credited with releasing the first gay country album in 1973 (Peck has sung with them), to Willie Nelson's 2006 version of the cowboy-lovin' anthem "Cowboys Are Frequently, Secretly Fond of Each Other" (Peck has covered it). His mask is reminiscent of Jimmy "Orion" Ellis, a 1970s and 1980s country singer with Presleyan vocals and an affinity for obscuring his face. Peck's masks are more SM than bedazzling like Ellis's, but a mask nonetheless signifies a love of showmanship.

"My introduction to country music was Dolly Parton when I was a kid, and I didn't know she was a real person," Peck

says "I thought she was like Elvira or something, because she was this larger-than-life character. That's the country music I love. People always think I'm playing a character, but that's not it at all. It's about a super-heightened version of yourself to tell the story better, which is what Dolly does. She wears wigs—she's a drag queen, basically—but she sings these sincere, heartbreaking songs, and it's all very genuine. That's kind of what I try to do."

Although Peck maintains his mysterious persona, he hasn't made up a past that doesn't exist. He's an entertainer, not a myth. Peck grew up all over, with a father who was a sound engineer for glamrock bands including Suzi Quatro and a mother who valued creativity; he has two brothers. A trained ballet dancer and singer obsessed with David Bowie and cowboys, Peck had started performing by the age of 10. He taught himself to play guitar, performed in punk bands and studied the art of mask-making before recording *Pony* on Gabriola Island in British Columbia.

"I think most people want to discount me as a hipster who's dipping my toe into this yee-haw agenda," Peck says. "But the reality is, this has been me for a long time. This has been a dream of mine my whole life."

His country dream is coming to fruition at a time when change is increasingly unavoidable, at least in terms of integrating queer voices and supporting LGBTQ people. Miranda Lambert dedicated her song "All Kinds of Kinds" to WorldPride 2019, which she attended in New York City; Carrie Underwood's "Love Wins" hints apolitically at equality; and Maren Morris is a fierce and outspoken advocate, as are Musgraves and Margo Price. Nashville is also evolving. Its music community rallied fast and hard when former Arkansas governor and vocal homophobe Mike Huckabee joined the CMA Foundation's board in 2018. He resigned in less than 24 hours.

Newer artists like Brandon Stansell are leaning in to mainstream careers as queer people, following in the path of Ty Herndon and Chely Wright, who both came out years after their debuts but whose careers never benefited from their truths. On the indie end, acts such as Karen & the Sorrows, Trixie Mattel and Little Bandit are breaching the genre to make it more inclusive. Brandi Carlile, a queer artist and 2019 Grammy nominee for album of the year, is doubling down on her commitment to the genre, producing country records, singing duets with Dierks Bentley and forming the female supergroup the Highwomen.

"She's really changing the narrative," says Peck, who sees a link between how country music has historically sidelined women and how it currently treats the queer community. "I feel like the problem is less about homophobia. It's a chauvinist problem," he says. "Female musicians go through this all the time. The gatekeepers of country, as is the way with everything on this planet, tend to be conservative, straight white men. I think that's kind of ending. I really do believe it."

Peck has dreams too, of performing at the CMA Awards, singing at Nelson's ranch and, of course, appearing at the Grand Ole Opry. He thinks they'll all come true, because despite the mask, he has never been less hidden in his life.

"I genuinely feel like I'm on a horse riding into the sunset, on my own terms," he says before disappearing into the hotel room with his bed of masks. There's a cowboy battle raging in Nashville, and Peck has been practicing with his whip. ■



A mermaid's tail, with a blue and white patterned upper section and a shimmering, iridescent lower section, is draped over dark, jagged rocks. The background shows a dark, rocky coastline under a bright, hazy sky.

The American Mermaid

Emily Alexandra
Guglielmo

Instagram @EmilyAlexandraGuglielmo









Such an absolute honor to have you on Playboy! Tell us about your modeling journey so far. I was first approached by Playboy in 2016 where they flew me out to L.A to do a few scenes for Playboy TV. It was not porn but a more playful, alluring, seductive video. It was super fun for a boxing video where I stripped out of my workout outfit into my birthday suit. Since then I have been on many covers and participated in many runway shoots. I am constantly working on commercials and I do most of my modeling and acting in Florida.

What's the one thing you absolutely can't start your day without? The 1 thing I can not start my day without is "Gratitude!" The first thing I do when I wake up is say all the things that I'm grateful for and do several affirmations out loud as I'm driving to the gym! This really helps to ground me and remind me to stay humble! I go about five days a week to the gym and start my morning doing yoga in the sauna! I like to sweat out my sins lol. Then I'll do a barre or fit class.

How would you describe your personal style? So funny, I was just talking to my sister about this the other week... My style is yoga/workout. But I wear sexy workout attire like Joan Brown and Lululemon. One thing about me is I MUST be comfortable. If I'm not comfortable, I will not be happy and will not wear it.

What's a hidden talent or skill you have that surprises people? I can bench extremely loud and shake the room... not sexy. But hey, I can throw grapes really high into the sky and catch them in my mouth perfectly.

What inspired you to pursue your current career or passion? I have always had an entrepreneurial spirit inside me since I was a child! I knew I wanted to succeed and

have fun in the process. But my journey has not been linear. I have been through many phases and have gone through tough times all while prospering and growing. I'm currently working on a dApp project where children can "Earn while they Learn" and then redeem their tokens for crypto and use them on the blockchain! I am also launching a skincare line called Siren Skin Skincare where I fuse cosmetics with skincare in a modern, innovative way. A portion of every purchase goes to Supportingwater.org where I find and raise money to bring drinking water to Emerging Nations. I'm very excited to do some missions coming up in 2025 & 2026 - Reach out to me to get involved.

What has been the most unexpected lesson you've learned along the way? Always do your due diligence with R&D, whether that's people, products, or business ventures. Trust people but ALWAYS ask questions before moving forward with a business move or relationship choice.

What's a dream project or goal you're excited to work on in the future? I'm very proud of my dApp project and am looking forward to spearheading into the realm of crypto and blockchain technology and all it has to offer! There's so much potential - Very exciting.

If your life were a movie, what would the title be? "The Life & Secret Mind of a Siren"

What's your favorite guilty-pleasure snack or meal? Ice cold Coke and a chocolate bar like Twix or M&M's.

How do you unwind and recharge after a busy day? I love to take a beautiful walk outside and listen to Mother Nature! I also enjoy a cold glass of iced water with lemon and

a yummy meal like a cheeseburger, double cheese or beef tacos.

If you could give one piece of advice to your younger self, what would it be? Never give up girl! Your value and worth is more than you have any idea! There are people that would kill to have your spot in life! Never get greedy and take people for granted! ALWAYS BE TRUE TO YOURSELF.

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sterling for all

AARON FEAVER



The trajectory of
Sterling K. Brown
has us on the
edge of our seat,
which is right
where he wants us

BY ANITA LITTLE

The first time I meet Sterling K. Brown the smoke is literally clearing around him. Yes, a crew member has just turned off a hazer as production pauses for Brown to swap into another look, but the metaphor is undeniable. The actor, despite almost two decades of well-regarded work on television, has only recently become a household name, thanks to his Emmy-winning performance across four seasons of NBC's *This Is Us*. Unlike Randall Pearson, the straitlaced, civically engaged and mathematician-smart patriarch he plays on the show, Brown has natural swag and commands the room with a rich, resonant voice trained at Stanford and in regional theater nationwide. Decked out in a visual tribute to casual cool—rolled-up trousers, a gold medallion and a half-buttoned graphic-print shirt—he asks, “Can we get some more Drizzy?” He shifts from posing to dancing as Drake’s “Controlia” fills the studio.

When I ask Brown how success and pop-culture notoriety have changed him, he responds quickly.

“I’m a total dick now,” he tells me. “I have narrowed my peripheral vision.”

Some might say this means he’s more goal-oriented. Others might add that it feels like a moment of profound clarity.

In 2018 Brown launched Indian Meadows Productions, which gave him the power not just to change the narrative but to create it. The production company’s namesake is the St. Louis neighborhood where Brown grew up. His mom still owns a house there, and his brothers and sisters are among the city’s residents. The mission of Indian Meadows Productions is to champion racial inclusion in Hollywood, both in front of the cameras and behind them. Brown has already closed a deal with Hulu for his company to produce an adaptation of Esi Edugyan’s bestselling book *Washington Black*.

“I wanted to have some sort of control over what stories could be put out to the world and take advantage of an opportunity to be one of the storytellers,” Brown says. “If you don’t have enough bells and whistles in terms of the right writers, the right showrunners, the right directors, the best piece of material can fall on deaf ears.”

By owning the means of production, so to speak, Brown will also be able to reshape one of the most formidable barriers for black-led media: marketing. Oftentimes, films and TV programs featuring predominantly black casts are promoted only to black

audiences, which can drastically reduce a project’s impact. (The packaging of works by Tyler Perry, who made history in October as the first black person to independently own a studio lot, comes to mind.) Recent films such as Jordan Peele’s *Us* and Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther*—in which Brown plays father to Michael B. Jordan’s Killmonger—have benefited from crossover appeal, both critically and at the box office, but they remain the exception. Nevertheless, the tide is shifting. The 2019 study “Inclusion in the Director’s Chair,” by the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, features an “intersectional analysis” of 1,335 directors attached to top-grossing films between 2007 and 2018. The study determined that “16 of the directors of the top 100 movies [in 2018] were black

this historically high figure is nearly three times greater than the six black directors working in 2017 and twice as many as the eight black directors working in 2007.”

Says Brown, “If you have a black movie, we need to stop selling it as if it’s only for a black audience. A movie about black people can appeal to anyone. All human stories have a universal appeal when told well.” One practice he has come up against in Hollywood is the casting of leading men of color opposite non-black actresses in an attempt to end-run the marketing of a film as a “black movie.” Saying he “frowns upon” black actors who have typically worked opposite white or Latina leading ladies, Brown is careful when choosing projects.

“Will Smith has the strength to pair himself with whomever he wants and sell that movie globally,” he says. “He can provide an opportunity to a sister to shine in a way they may not be able to if it weren’t a Will Smith movie.”

When projects with black casts reach







“

A movie about black people can appeal to anyone. All human stories have a universal appeal when told well.”



a broader audience, that of course results in more big breaks for black actors, directors and writers. Brown's success is proof: His command on the mainstream *This Is Us* and the Ryan Murphy produced *American Crime Story*, both of which feature relatively diverse casts, led to a lot of televised acceptance speeches. In addition to his two Emmy wins, he is the first African American to win a Golden Globe for best actor on a television drama and the first African American male actor to win a Screen Actors Guild Award for a drama series. Outside of *This Is Us* and *Indian Meadows*, Brown added A24's November release *Waves* to his film résumé, nabbed a part in Disney's colossal *Frozen* sequel and will appear on the next season of Amazon Prime's flagship comedy *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*.

I ask Brown if, as a leader in an industry that suffers from a scarcity of opportunities for actors of color, he feels pressure to embody the punishing standard of #BlackExcellence. He tents his fingers, leans back and ventures a joke. "We got to keep it together, because they got Mekhi Phifer or Omar Epps on call, waiting to come in and replace your boy," he says. "You spend so long feeling replaceable that it's hard to shake that feeling."

His television fame is concurrent with something else, something he's learned to be unabashed about but never expected, his emergence as a sex symbol. Randall Pearson wasn't scripted to be sexy, but thirst isn't predictable. On Google "Sterling K. Brown shirtless" returns more than 1 million results. Some of the most over-the-top headlines include sterling k. brown's sexy abs shatter instagram and give the people sterling k. brown's booty!

"Sneaky fit" is the term Brown uses to describe his physique. "I'm not popping out of my clothes per se, but if I ever take my shirt off, you'd be like, Oh snap, I didn't see that one coming." He quickly adds, "I don't think I've ever gotten a job because of the way I was built. People have seen me as being a good actor, and they hire me for things in which they need a good actor."

The hypersexuality assigned to black men has some grisly historical underpinnings that are glazed over in horny internet chatter. "It's a slippery slope, and it's one that is dangerous," he says — but Brown recognizes that "it's nice to have your sexuality celebrated, as long as you're being celebrated in total, as a whole human being and not fetishized as one particular thing."

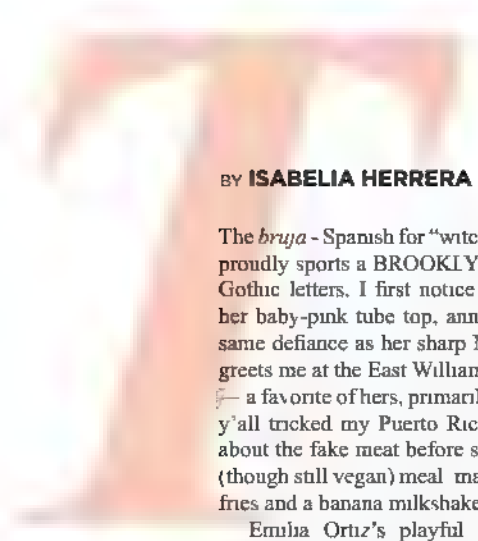
In other words, "sex symbol" is not a terrible title when it's your least impressive achievement. After years of laying the groundwork, Brown seems to have found the freedom to transcend being one thing and to embrace many personas: the total dick, the leading man, the producer, the trailblazer, even the sex symbol. No wonder audiences are mesmerized. ■



WHAT HAPPENS
WHEN A WITCH GETS
WI-FI? MEET THE
WOMAN WHO USES
SACRED SPIRITUALITY
TO ENCHANT OUR
DAILY LIVES (AND
MAYBE EVEN SAVE
OUR MENTAL HEALTH)

EMILIA ORTIZ

INTERVIEW BY BRAD OGBONNA



BY ISABELIA HERRERA

The *bruja* - Spanish for “witch” - sitting across from me proudly sports a BROOKLYN chest tattoo in sprawling Gothic letters. I first notice it peeking out from under her baby-pink tube top, announcing her roots with the same defiance as her sharp Nuyorican accent when she greets me at the East Williamsburg vegan diner Champs - a favorite of hers, primarily for its seitan asada. “How y’all tricked my Puerto Rican ass?” she says jokingly about the fake meat before settling on a more indulgent (though still vegan) meal: macaroni and cheese, a side of fries and a banana milkshake.

Emilia Ortiz’s playful irreverence has no doubt burnished her internet fame, but that fame can mostly be attributed to what she promulgates. She’s part *bruja*, part healer and part mental-health advocate, and she draws on an eclectic collection of spiritual practices, including candle work, reiki and meditation, to help people live better lives. In minute-long Instagram videos - she practices both privately and publicly - Ortiz doles out affirmations and guidance to some 227,000 followers. She’s often sitting in front of her vast collection of houseplants. They’re named, of course: Chachi, Rosa, Conejo Malo, etc.

Instead of the hushed tones you might expect from a counselor, Ortiz punctuates her videos with expletives. “In case you ain’t already know, I’m tell your ass. You are a magnificent-ass being. Your guts are made of motherfucking stardust, okay?... I’ve been checking up on your ass in the collective consciousness, and let me tell you, *You’re beautiful*.”

This tough talk distinguishes her from her peers - a growing cavalcade of women who are reclaiming previously denounced forms of spirituality. In pop culture, online and in real life, there has been a resurgence of sorcery. Consider the recent flood of witch-inspired television shows, such as *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, *American Horror Story*, the *Charmed* reboot and *Game of Thrones*. As of 2014, approximately 700,000 American adults identified as Wiccan or pagan, compared with just 8,000 Wiccans in 1990. Although organized religion is losing favor among younger people - about 35 percent of millennials don’t identify with any religion, according to a 2014 Pew Research Center survey - the cultural demand for spirituality, self-help and wellness is booming.

In Latinx communities in particular, a renewed focus on *brujeria* signals a long overdue resurrection of sorts - a revival of the once-condemned mysticism entwined in our heritage. Throughout the colonial era, the Catholic Church persecuted *brujas*, branding them evil enchantresses. Today *brujas* can practice openly,

which means a new generation is exploring *brujeria* in the same place they explore everything else: the internet.

Ortiz is among the most beloved practitioners working today, and she has always been surrounded by magic. The bodegas in the New York Afro-Caribbean neighborhood where she grew up sold *agua de florida*, a sacred ritual water used for protection spells and cleansings. The local botanica, a sort of apothecary dedicated to folk religion and alternative medicine, stocked every candle, amulet and statuette she would ever need. These totems were part and parcel of her diasporic upbringing.

Her spiritual gifts manifested through her dreams as a young girl. She would astral project, an experience closely related to lucid dreaming. “I would feel everything in my dreams, have control of my dreams and not be able to figure out if I was dreaming or if I was awake,” she says. “As a kid, that’s fucking scary, so my father would talk to my grandmother about it, and she’d help me figure it out.”

It was her *abuela* who first exposed Ortiz to *brujeria*. As in many Caribbean families, Ortiz’s grandmother cultivated her practice from a wellspring of traditions passed down by ancestors. Some folks are formally initiated into a particular religion, such as Santería, but many of the skills Ortiz’s *abuela* imparted - such as dream interpretation and candle work - are embedded in the cultural memory of Puerto Ricans and other Caribbean communities. Her grandmother’s approach was a dexterous bricolage of rites that included everything from *limpias* (cleansings) to numerology.

“Whatever kind of *limpia* you needed, she got you. Whatever kind of *vela* [candle] you needed, she got you,” Ortiz says. She recalls a childhood incident when her grandmother dispelled bad spirits from a home her parents had just moved into. “Somebody kept cursing juju on the apartment,” she says. Her grandmother doused the place in *agua de florida* and lit a candle (in a bucket so the family cat wouldn’t tip it over and set the apartment on fire). According to her mother, Ortiz says, “the house smelled like Florida water for a whole fucking week.”

Other lessons included healing techniques, spiritual bathing and menstruation rituals. As Ortiz matured and confronted anxiety and depression in high school, she came to rely on such rituals for strength. That’s when she realized she could help others.

Today, Ortiz marries her personal experiences with digital advocacy, offering one-on-one spiritual guidance over the phone and using Instagram to raise awareness and reduce the stigma around mental health, especially in low-income communities of color. Multiple studies have suggested that

Y'ALL ARE OUT HERE MAKING THIS A TOURIST DESTINATION."

depression among Americans of all ages is on the rise, but diagnoses among young people are increasing the fastest, by as much as 47 percent from 2013 to 2016 among 18- to 34-year-olds, according to a 2018 Blue Cross Blue Shield report.

As witchcraft's influence on the zeitgeist grows, Ortiz's philosophy of merging the contemporary and the ancestral sets her apart, but it also invites criticism. "While things are evolving, tradition is something that should be kept in mind," she says. "I'm not a strict traditionalist, because not everybody should be one, but we should be honoring the ancestors in our modern world and continuously re-educate ourselves on the traditional ways."

Witchcraft's infiltration of popular culture has sparked a thorny debate around authenticity, exploitation and cultural ownership. With sacred spirituality proliferating on digital spaces, more people are seeking out these alternative forms of healing. This includes outsiders alongside descendants of people who depended on such practices for basic survival. The ayahuasca boom is one example of the rapidly spreading interest in Latin American folkloric healing practices: Stroll the streets of Williamsburg and you'll find multiple healing centers offering \$500 ayahuasca ceremonies guided by amateur practitioners who claim to have studied with Quechua and Shipibo shamans in the Amazon rain forest.

Ortiz's Caribbean roots mean she doesn't specifically work with the hallucinogenic brew, but as a bruja she remains concerned about unqualified outsiders profiting off ancient practices. "There are so many people trying to preserve this for their culture, and y'all are out here making this a tourist destination," she says. "Everybody needs to go find their something and figure it out. If we work toward that, where people have reclaimed and are actually practicing their own shit, there will be a point where it's okay to share knowledge."

To some Latinx folks, claiming the *bruja* identity is a means of normalizing once-maligned traditions.

For others, it's a form of virtue signaling and clout chasing, a careless erasure of the discipline and years of training required to become a spiritual healer. After all, Ortiz's public practice lives on a platform known for meme-ifying the human experience and cataloging it for mass validation, not selfpreservation. In Puerto Rico in particular, ancestral spiritual practices were attacked throughout the colonial period. As late as 1879, the Spanish crown targeted *espiritismo* by mandating municipal permission for *veladas*, or nighttime séances. Now you can conduct your séance on Instagram Live.

Given the tangled history of oppression, Ortiz views her practice as a way of memorializing our forebears. "We're honoring ancestors by doing this in the present day, and especially by being open with it. We're honoring them in a way that's like, 'This is how you should have been able to practice, and I honor you by doing it in this way.'"

At the same time, she acknowledges the pitfalls of performing certain rituals without proper training not only out of respect for tradition but in recognition of the potential danger to the self. "Witchcraft and *brujería* are for everybody, but you need to be mindful of what you're practicing," she says. "I would not advise anybody to go out and start performing." She warns me about the dangers of botched ceremonies and individuals who perform divination sessions without the mentorship of an elder.

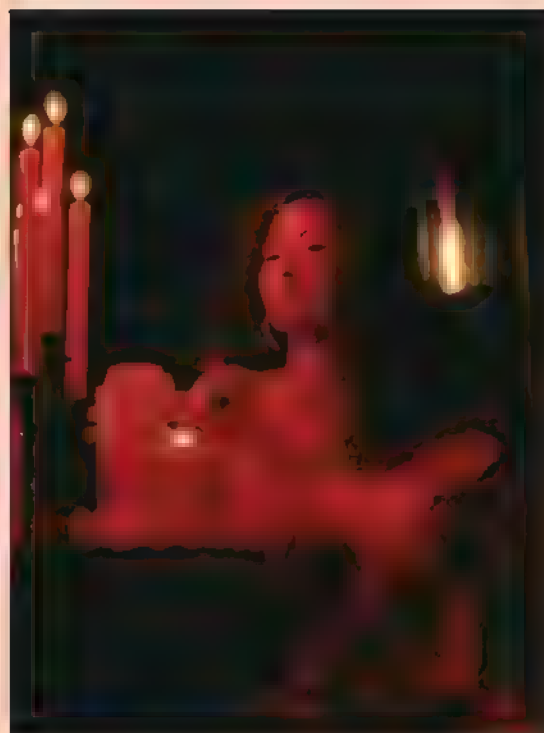
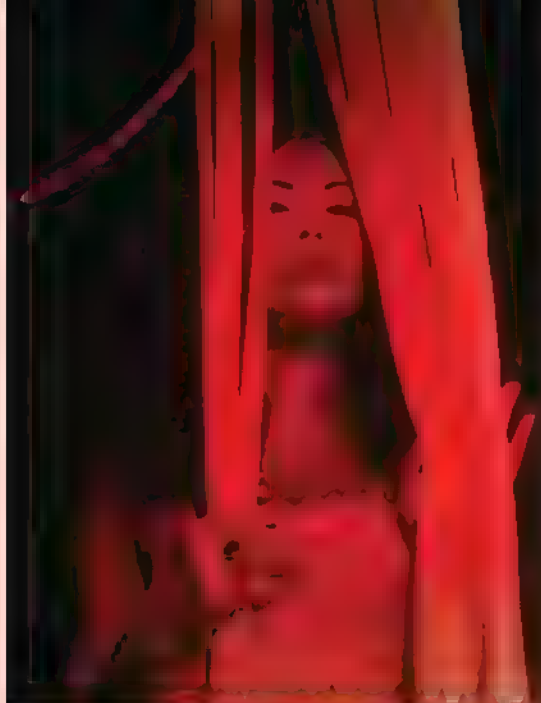
"If you're just trying to see if it's for you, then get some books, go to a botanica and ask about it a bit. But don't just decide, 'All right, I'm gonna go cop a Yemaya statue because I like how she looks.' If you get into this shit the wrong way, you can end up opening yourself up to things you don't want to touch, and you won't have anybody to help you remove it or protect you."

Ortiz admits to being wary of the gatekeeper role, particularly since the meaning of these practices has shifted over time, creating new belief patterns. What is the meaning of modern *brujería*, I wonder.

"I'm not an elder yet, and our elders are probably who should be answering such questions," she says. "They did this through the times when they were persecuted."

Clearly, Ortiz doesn't want to position herself as an authority, especially when so much of her advocacy is based on her own experiences. "As I continue to get older, I'm becoming more private with my personal practice," she says, adding that she hopes to open a family practice focused on accessibility. She doesn't see herself following a traditional trajectory into priestesshood until she has children—who, she predicts, will have gifts just as she does. "I'll probably be losing my mind over my children's intuition and their guides telling me things about myself that I don't want to hear," she says with a laugh.

Before we part ways, Ortiz offers this: "I want people to feel like it's doable. Magic, in this day and age, is not the unknown. It's making the unknown part of the everyday." ■





A hand holding a lit match is positioned over a dark metal chair. The background is a blurred room with a bed and a window. The title 'WALK THE TALK' is overlaid in large white letters.

WALK THE TALK

HOW LEARNING TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY COULD SAVE YOUR RELATIONSHIP

There are three things that I truly believe we should get taught in school, how to do our own taxes, what really happens during sex, and how to effectively and constructively communicate. This last skill would be incredibly useful in not only romantic relationships but in work and family relationships and friendships as well. Unfortunately, we don't leave high school and enter our adulthood with effective techniques and skills that assist us in knowing how to have constructive conversations, and I spend much of my time working with couples and helping them to learn these skills and techniques. Let's break down the basics of good communication, as well as looking at some specific techniques you can use.

REMEMBER, TALKING IS HOW WE ENGAGE. IT'S A VITAL (AND POWERFUL) TOOL THAT SHOULDN'T BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED

1. Ensure you're always engaging in active listening Active listening is pretty easy to do. It means to listen to our partner without thinking about anything else but what they are saying at that moment by being present and fully engaged.

- Maintain eye contact (well, as much as possible), as this helps your partner to really feel that you're listening and you're present. When you're staring off into the TV or your phone, or perhaps even gazing at the floor, your partner will feel less important and may even perhaps feel that you don't care.

- We act like we are listening, but we are doing "whatever listening" when we are distracted instead of paying attention to what our partner is saying it's as if we don't care; "I'm right..." listening when we already know we're right and have the answer, and so we stop listening before a person has finished speaking; or "what next..." listening where we are thinking ahead, or of something completely different while a person is talking to us.

2. Always use 'I' language one of the most important communication skills is to learn the use of 'I' messages. This is because when you start a sentence with 'you', your partner might feel attacked, blamed or criticized and thus they'll feel the need to defend themselves. Begin to use the words "I feel..." when talking to your partner. For example, "I feel unimportant when you're late for dinner and don't call" is much more effective than, "you don't care about anyone but yourself, or you wouldn't keep me waiting." The 'you' statement is a blaming statement, and will often start or escalate an argument. An 'I' statement reports feelings and it's easier for your partner to respond in a positive way as they don't feel like they are being blamed. Feeling words are emotions, and include words such as: hurt, angry, frustrated, lonely, inadequate, upset, disappointed, forgotten, appreciated, happy, loved, etc.

3. Choose the right time and place if you want

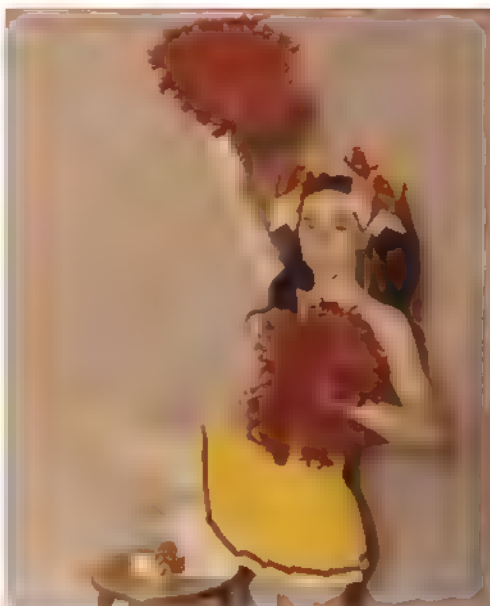
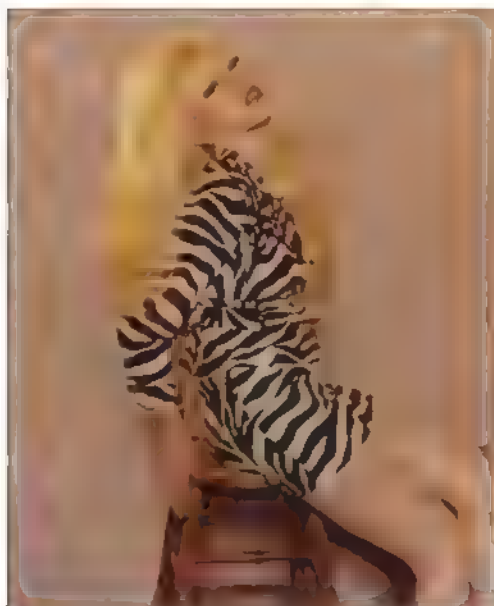
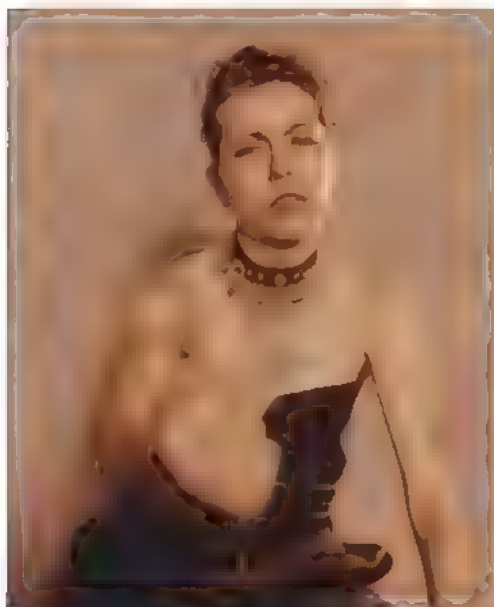
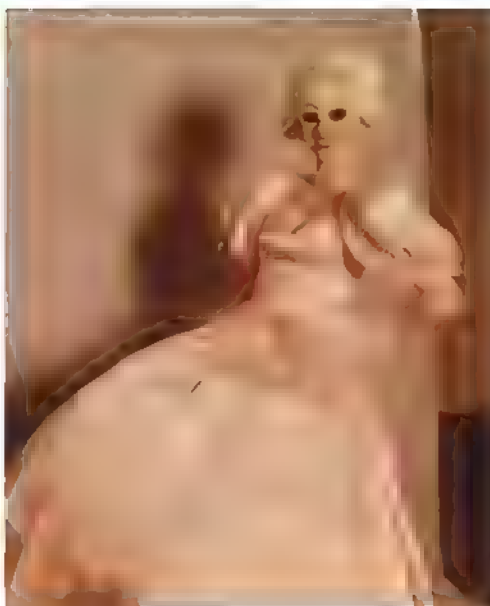
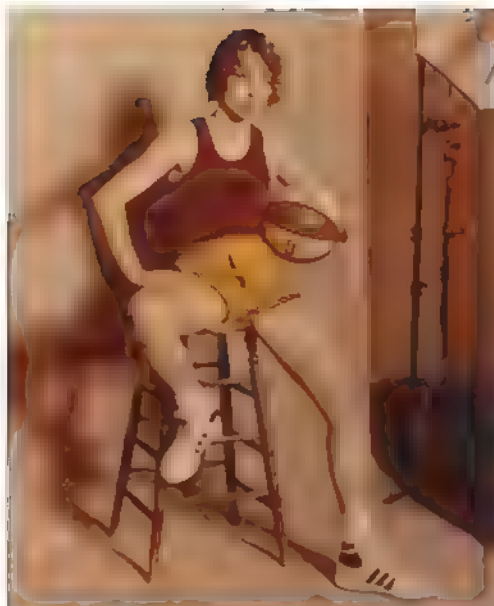
to talk to your partner about something that has been bugging you, it's really helpful to choose a time and a place that is suitable, and where you'll be uninterrupted. Generally, and if you can, try to have difficult conversations in person. Never try to resolve an issue late at night, when you've been drinking, or when your emotions (maybe anger, rage, anxiety) are so high that you cannot think straight. It's okay to go to bed after an argument! Rather agree to resolve it in the morning after you've both tried to get some sleep. Try not to have conflictual conversations in front of friends and family either. It's not fair to them to be stuck around a fighting couple. Again, agree to press pause and pick up the conversation when the timing is more appropriate.

4. Bringing up the past never helped anybody no matter how many times your partner did something before, or what has happened that has caused the conflict, try your best to stick with the present moment, how you feel right then and there, and why you're feeling it. People become defensive when they're constantly blamed, so bringing up something that has been an issue again and again, in the same way, is likely going to have the same result it has had in the past.

5. Be curious... always! - it doesn't help anyone to accuse their partner of doing something without trying to understand their partner's point of view. A really great statement to use when sharing with your partner what's on your mind is this: "The story that I'm telling myself is that..." and then asking your partner if you've got it wrong? Owning the way you have conceptualized a situation is important very few partners take ownership of their disagreements. By being curious and always asking your partner what was happening for them rather than accusing them, or asking them what they need or could be done differently between you can be the difference between constructive or destructive communication



CLASS OF 1950



("Dirty on the inside, damaged goods with nothing but pride / Yeah, you give me wood / Give me lady wood") while being taught that abstinence is the best form of protection?

"To learn through the lyrics of a song, the media or the internet helps young people discover the culture they came from," says Amelia Abraham, author of *Queer Intentions: A (Personal) Journey Through LGBTQ+ Culture*. "If you're not taught by your parents or in sex education in school about your culture and history, then where are you going to learn about it?"

King Princess isn't the only female pop artist tearing up taboos and inspiring an age of sexual discovery within



pop. The meteoric rise of Lizzo, and her cross-genre appeal, is tied to her professions of self-love and sexual pride. And the 23-year-old bisexual singer-songwriter Slayyyter, born Catherine Slater, has gained a sizable fan base by releasing hypersexual music online. "Boy, can you eat me right?" she asks over scuzzy electronic beats in "Candy," released in September 2018. Her spin on Mariah Carey's holiday classic "All I Want for Christmas" is no less matter-of-fact: "All I want for Christmas is to get fucked / Take a big hit, get my tits sucked," the chorus repeats.

A former sex worker, Slayyyter makes music in her bedroom. Earlier this year, she went viral after teasing 14 seconds of her song "Mine" on Twitter. "I didn't know your name, boy / I fell in love / First kiss, your lips drove me insane, boy," she sings, adding living proof that sexually liberated artists can rise from obscurity without simultaneously commercializing and diminishing sex for radio spins.

"I have always been a very sex-positive person, but as a former sex worker, it's something that comes naturally to me," Slayyyter tells *PLAYBOY*. While her approach to sex is imperative to her success, Slayyyter wants people to know her sexuality isn't a shuck. An independent artist, she remains in charge of her body and her sound. "I recently saw someone on Twitter say my brand is 'Being a Whore,'" she says. "It ticked me off, because I don't think of it as that. It's just who I am."

No surprise, a lesson on owning one's sexual identity is not included among the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's "19 Critical Sexual Education Topics," an online learning aid meant to inform sex-education curricula. Intimacy and pleasure are similarly ignored. Considering that humans have been fornicating for pleasure's sake for eternity — and that sex has consumed adolescence for just as long — it's strange to think we're still reckoning with improper education and debates about sexuality. The breakthrough pop stars of 2018 and 2019 seem to be recognizing an opportunity, and their success isn't dependent on an industry that for decades has manufactured and rewarded hypersexualized but hollow pop stars and catalogs of euphemistic songs. Pop stars can now be sexy, sex positive and sexually explicit. But this isn't just about pussy. It's a generational awakening. ■









"Baby, it's really cold outside."

playboy's party jokes

SEX talk about sex in 2019 the way they used to talk about having a baby: "The gender doesn't matter to me, as long as it's healthy." *Bri Pruett*

MUTUAL masturbation is like paying a handyman to assemble an Ikea bed instead of putting it together yourself. Either way, you're going to take a nap afterward, but you'll have a better time if someone does it for you. *Adam Levin*

A girl once told me she wanted to experiment in bed, so I poured a bunch of baking soda and vinegar into her belly button and yelled "*Behold the majesty of Krakatoa!*" Anyway, we're married now. *Ian Karmel*

YOU can tell a man is about to end things when he starts listing all your good qualities in a really sad voice. "You're smart. You're successful. You're funny." Oh no. And you're dumping me! *Marcia Belsky*

A man asked his reclusive brother what he'd been up to.

"I joined one of those multilevel marketing schemes," the brother replied.

"Huh," the man said skeptically. "Looking to make a little money on the side?"

"No, I'm looking for people to stop inviting me to stuff or contacting me for any reason." *Joseph Scialabba*

A girl once told me she wanted to role-play in bed, so I threw 20-sided dice as a saving roll against a cacodemon's fire attack. Anyway, we're married now. *I.K.*



I'M not sure if anybody knows this, but female dogs refer to doggy style as "the only thing my boring husband ever wants to do." *Amy Silverberg*

LIFEHACK: If you stand outside a nice restaurant wearing a red jacket, people will literally give you the keys to their car. *JS*

WE'VE all seen the articles asking why millennials are having less sex than baby boomers. Well, you'd have less sex too if you could masturbate to anime porn while ordering Chipotle. *Andy Haynes*

IF you're not five minutes early, you're five minutes late. Unless you text "OMW" and just show up whenever. *B.P.*

IT'S scary how happy the skip intro button makes us. We're all so horned up for TV that even Netflix is like, "You wanna ditch this foreplay bullshit?" and we're like, "PUT IT IN!" *JS*

LOOK on the bright side. Once you lose your virginity, technically your entire life is postcoital. *Robert Buscemi*

I used to have sex with straight men like it was going out of style. Little did I know, it absolutely was. *B.P.*

OUR Unabashed Dictionary has been enhanced with four more variations on the term *sexting*.

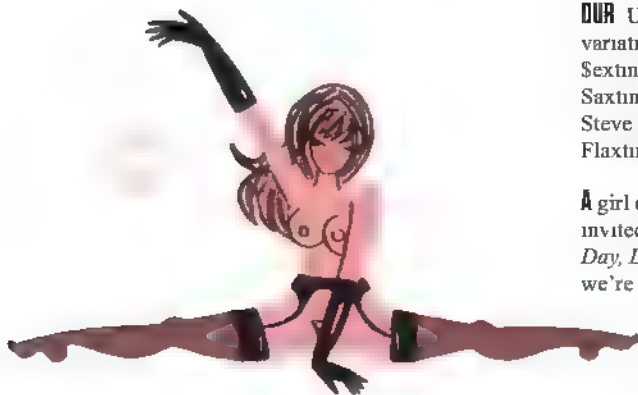
\$exting Sexy texting with a prostitute.

Saxting Sexy texting with the ghost of Clarence Clemons.

Steve Saxting Sexy texting with lifetime .281 hitter Steve Sax.

Flaxting Sexy texting with a burlap sack of ancient grain. *I.K.*

A girl once told me she wanted to bring another man into bed, so we invited the beloved actor known for his starring roles in *Groundhog Day*, *Lost in Translation* and *Caddyshack* to sleep with us. Anyway, we're Murray now. *I.K.*





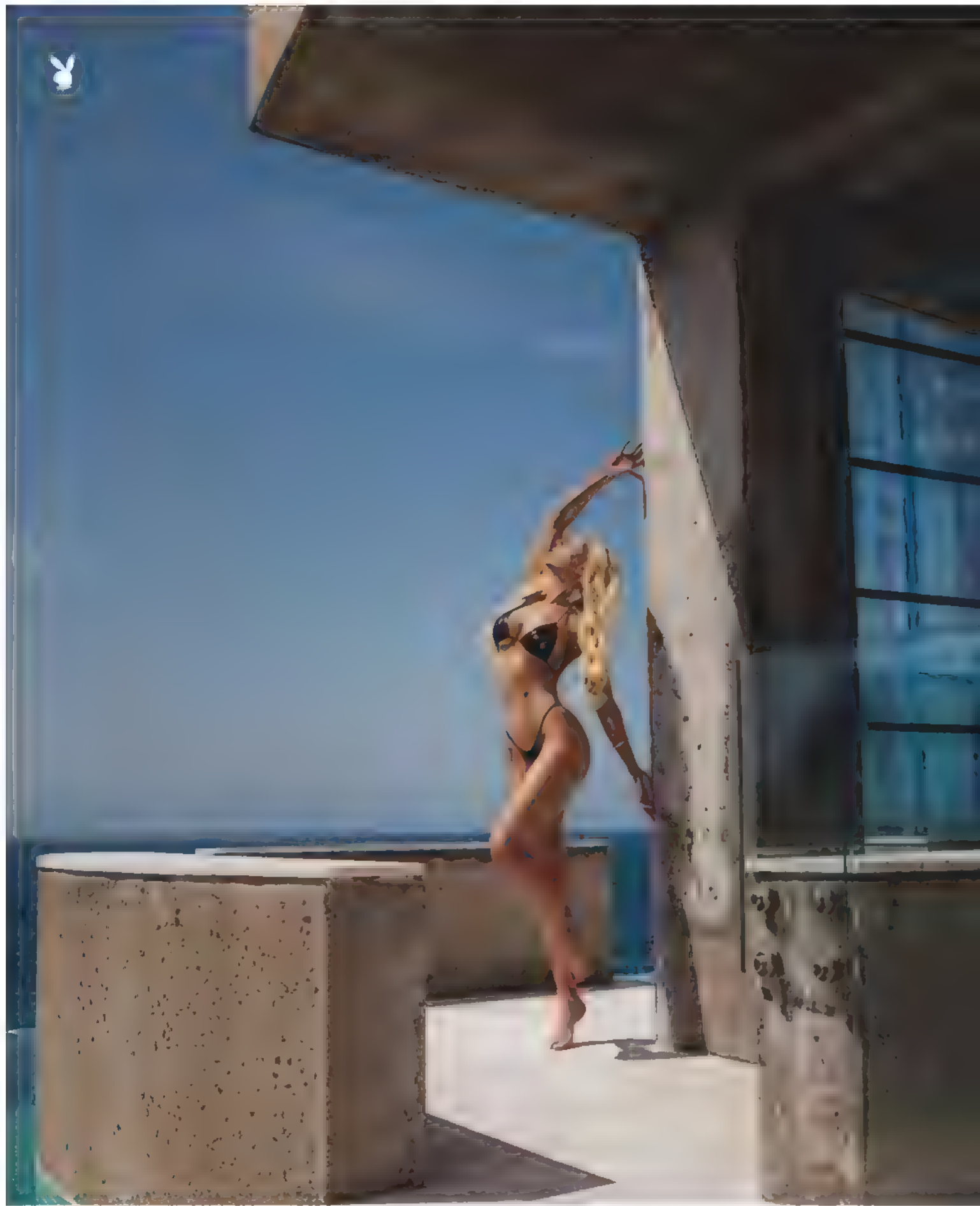
The Playboy

Candice Kane

Model @candicekanevip2

Photography by Rocky Batchelor | @rockybatchelor









What was your reaction when you found out you'd be featured on the cover? At first I surely thought this was some kind of joke as I have never thought I'd be given this opportunity! But here I am now gracing the cover of Playboy Australia and for my birthday month too.

How did you prepare for this shoot? I have always been a total fitness freak so I just went a little harder at the gym and tightened up my calorie intake just to make sure I was at my best! But I certainly did eat the biggest pizza I could find after the shoot was done.

What does this magazine feature mean to you and your career? Basically, so I can just look back when I'm in my 80s and say to myself "look at those tits"

Can you share any memorable moments from the shoot? There are always funny moments from every shoot but I do recall my hairdresser and I scrambling to find a way to wash my hair without a basin so we found a children's high chair for me to sit in naked with my head back in the kitchen sink. I do have a video of this too.

What's your favorite look or outfit from the photoshoot? I love my "dripping in pearls" outfit. I felt so fabulous.

Do you have any hidden talents, if so what is it? I don't really hide it but I can do the splits.

Who has been your biggest influence? My mother. I wouldn't be the woman I am today without her.

How would you describe your personal style? A little classy and a little trashy with a dash of girl next door. So basically anything goes haha.

What advice would you give to your younger self? Listen to your gut because it will never lie to you.

Do you have any upcoming projects or collaborations you're excited about? I have some top exciting plans but right

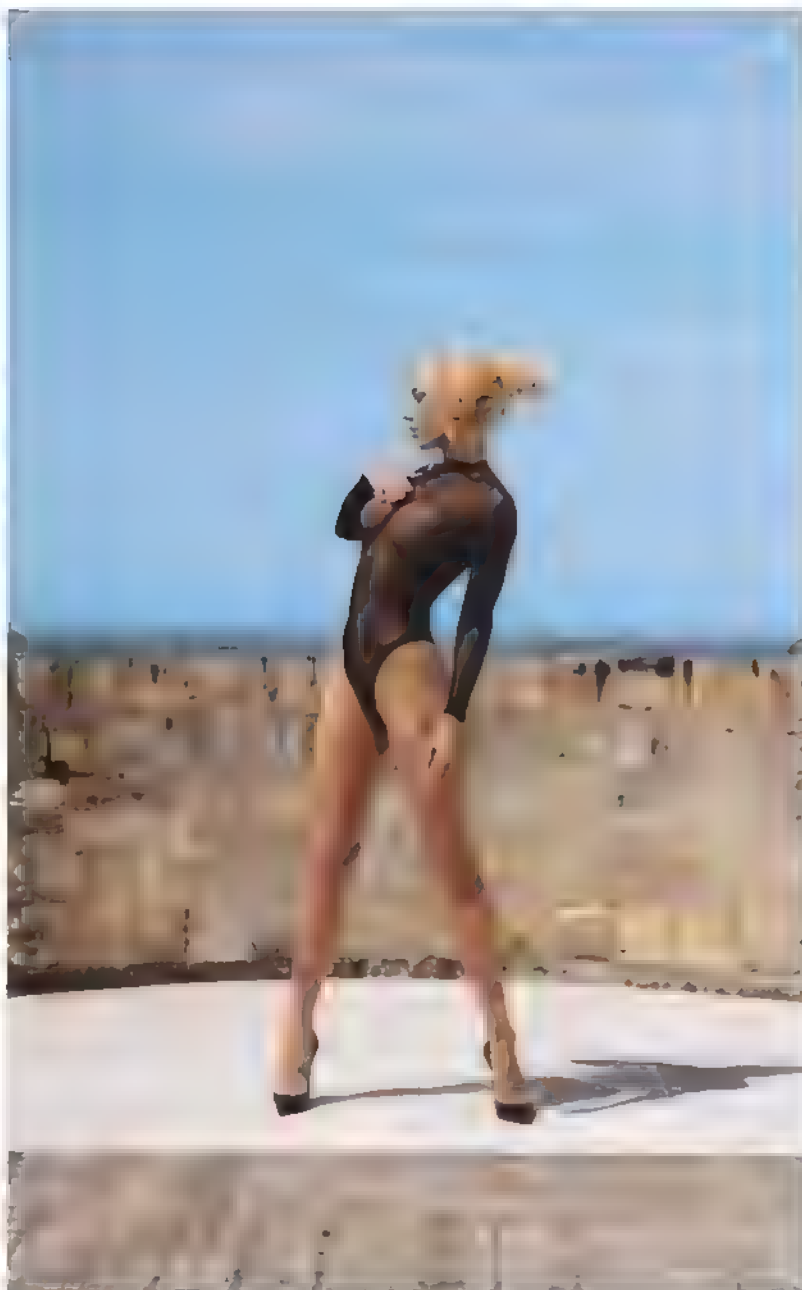
now you will just have to wait.

What's your favorite way to unwind? I'm a simple girl really so just laying back in a Comfy in bed with a man between my legs.

What is your favorite body part on you? on him? on her? On my I love me, cheeky eyes and my peachy bum. On him Well that thing between the legs gets me going every time.

How do you see your career evolving in the future? I take it day by day and am grateful for every moment. I love meeting new people and making connections.

Thanks so much for your time, Where can our readers follow you on social to stay updated on what you're up to? My website is candicekane.com, IG @candicekanevip2 and Twitter candicekanevip.















ARTWORK BY **ALPHACHANNELING**

JANUARY 2025

PLAYBOY ADVISOR

Shan Boodram, clinical sexologist, YouTube star and author of *The Game of Desire*, taps her followers and offers unflaggingly positive advice to a woman who can't stop thinking about sex, a guy who can't get women to like him and others whose dilemmas may just be your own

Q: *Is it normal to think about sex 24/7? I'm a 28-year-old woman who just got her master's degree and is playing the field while praying for a future partner — and I honestly feel that I'm addicted to sex. It just naturally seeps into my thoughts no matter what I'm doing, even at the most inappropriate times. When I envision my future partner, he's just as much of a freak as I am! Are there other men and women out there who feel the same things?* T.G.

A: We are all so much alike! The details may vary, but the root questions are pretty much the same: Am I normal? Am I worthy of being loved? Based on what you describe, the answer to both those questions is “Hell yes!” But if you're worried about your relationship with sex, ask yourself these questions: Is my sex drive in conflict with local laws? Has my sex drive blatantly impeded my progress in other areas of life? Is my sex drive often a point of moral contention in my relationships? If you answered yes to any of these, it might be a good idea to speak to a licensed professional — not because you're an addict per se but because balance isn't easy. If you answered no to all three, and you find that sex is by and large a joyful part of your life, just know that I've never met a single human being who claimed their sex life, libido, desires, opinions or beliefs were perfect. We are all trying to find love, make connections, grow, have some orgasms and make peace with ourselves (in no particular order). That said, there is absolutely a partner out there

for you who can match your physical drive and meet your emotional qualifications, you just have to be intentional in finding him. As a woman who just completed her master's, you already get the formula. Know who you are, know where you fit best and immerse yourself in that community so you can align with like minds in the areas that matter to you the most.

Q: *I'm a man in his 30s and have been in a relationship with someone I deeply love for two years. I recently met another woman who's cool and works in the same industry as I do. We got together for coffee a couple of weeks after meeting, and we've been texting ever since — maybe it's just friendly, maybe it's a little bit flirty. I still haven't told her I have a girlfriend, and it's starting to feel weird. On one hand, I don't want to assume she likes me “that way.” On the other, I feel I'm being dishonest with her and especially with my girlfriend. Where do I go from here?* S.P.

A: First, know that scenarios like this will come up on both sides. I highly encourage you to discuss it with your partner, because at the end of the day, having a second person to navigate the complexities of life with is the joy of being in a relationship! Why is it that in romantic connections we accept that we have to share the undersides of our humanity (poop horror stories, credit drama, morning breath and all), but when it comes to our natural drive to desire and be desired by others, we all want our partners to believe we're superhuman?

Well, as it turns out, you're not made of steel — so don't be afraid to admit that to your girlfriend and ask for guidance on how to manage both the situation and your feelings. As for the other woman, you already know the answer to this. Yeah, you should bring it up, but I also think your senses are correct. Instead of making it a cautionary statement, look for a casual way to insert it into the conversation.

Q: *I recently started dating a person who's transitioning and has bottom dysmorphia. They were born with female parts, and as a female I thought I would be able to better figure out their body, but it's daunting right now because they feel weird about their genitals, and I don't know how to navigate. How can I get to know my partner and their body in a way that will make us both feel comfortable?* J.M.

A: Congrats to your partner for making such an important decision, and also congrats to the two of you on your new connection. I'm going to remind you of something I'm certain you already know: Change is not easy, and it absolutely is not instant! Your partner may have spent 20-plus years feeling uncomfortable in their body or getting messages about their genitals that never aligned with their feelings — and as powerful as the decision to take ownership over their truth through transitioning is, it does not magically erase all those damaging, dysmorphic years. If it took them two decades to make the decision to change, they're allowed to take at least a third of that time to heal from the

The woman who has never had an orgasm or masturbated has likely not found her middle, because no one has ever invited her there.

dissonance they were surely feeling all that time. The good news is that though change isn't instant, if nurtured, it can be gradual. Through patience, positive affirmation and lots of communication, you should see an improvement in their attitude toward themselves, which will result in a better connection in the bedroom. Just remember that you should not expect a 180. Allow them to take the lead as much as possible. If you need a nudge, watch porn that turns both of you on and use it as a tool to discuss what you're comfortable and not comfortable exploring together.

Q: *My girlfriend and I (a man) have been together for three years, and I love her immensely, but due to a lack of activity, our sex life is not that great. She works as an exotic dancer, and I think this affects her views on sexual intimacy. When I try to talk about it with her, she mainly tells me what I want to hear or avoids the question altogether. I would like to break down that barrier and get her to be more open. I know this will be difficult because of the industry she works in—and I have chosen to accept that aspect—so how can I help our sex life progress?* R.U.

A: With this attitude you're already 80 percent there; all you have to do is figure out the other 20 percent together. I would imagine that, as an exotic dancer, your girlfriend might have some difficulty untangling her sexual practices at work from those at home. At work she probably has two modes, one in which she portrays someone else's sexual fantasy and another in which she shuts down her sexuality to recenter herself. It sounds as though this mirrors how she treats conversations around intimacy, either saying what she

thinks you want to hear or not speaking at all. My guess is she would like space to call the shots, to allow things to be her idea and to know that there is no expectation for anything other than her truth. This transition may take time and a lot of verbal affirmations along the way. As a starting point, I would suggest you learn her "turn-on triggers"—a system I created to help couples understand, beyond basic biological instigators, what gets their partner in the mood. The triggers are environmental (the five senses must be appeased, meaning the environment must be tidy and set), mental (e.g., a sapiosexual who requires a mental connection before a physical one), desire (direct language or actions that make someone feel wanted), cat-and-mouse (power play in which a partner likes to work for it or be worked for), negotiated (something else in addition to sex must be offered to sweeten the pot) and visual (attention to appearance is paramount). I have a quiz you both can take to learn what each other's triggers are, thegameofdesire.com/quiz. Try it out as a launching point.

Q: *What advice would you give a 20-something woman who has never had an orgasm because she can't rid herself of the idea that self-pleasure is bad or dirty? She doesn't know what she likes or even how to figure it out, which makes telling her partners what to do that much more difficult.* R.W.

A: I have seen this question many, many times. What that person needs more than anything else right now is patience with herself as opposed to a quick "get over it and get into it" fix. Years and years of sex-negative messaging are not that easy

to erase! I am a person who has drenched herself in sex-positive content, and I still, at times, feel internally shamed. Instead of trying to ignore those feelings when they come up, I embrace them. I examine where they're coming from, I ask myself how credible the original source is, and I make tiny adjustments to my behavior so that I can work through my feelings slowly. The woman who has never had an orgasm or masturbated has likely not found her middle, because no one has ever invited her there. Her past told her to deny her sexual self, and perhaps those in her present are pushing her to be totally liberated in her sexual pursuits. That's a big jump. I would suggest she ignore both, find her own true starting point and take it from there. And because this can never be said enough, I'd like to add that while it can seem as though the rest of the world is living in the land of milk and orgasms, women's pleasure researcher Elisabeth Lloyd, author of *The Case of the Female Orgasm*, has found that only 25 percent of women are consistently orgasmic during vaginal intercourse and about five percent never have orgasms. The path to pleasure is not linear for many women—all the more reason to take it slow and do it your way.

Q: *I'm in a monogamous relationship with the love of my life, but I've recently become attracted to someone else—a woman (like me) whom I know well and have been interested in on and off since before this relationship. I've suggested polyamory, but my partner isn't onboard with that. What should I do?* G.S.

A: It sounds like what you need is an opportunity to explore this connection with your "someone else" without impinging



on your primary partnership. Interest and engagement are very different things. After spending more time with the other woman, the reasons the two of you never worked out may become clearer. On the flip side, maybe through this exploration you'll decide that she can actually improve all your relationships by allowing you to be in full, balanced expression. At that point I'd revisit the polyamory discussion with your partner. You may be looking for a free relationship—defined not by the rules or titles you chose in the beginning but by how each partner feels at any given time. The only thing constant in this world is change, and in a free relationship this isn't just your reality; it's your mantra. In order for this arrangement to thrive, you must be committed to hearing your partner's truths without constantly personalizing them. You acknowledge that your relationship is yours to experience, not to control. In short, when it comes to the rules of your relationship, you edit them often. And I suspect that right now what you need is a relationship that gives you space to flirt, connect and gain clarity.

Q: *I want to get straight to the point. How do I get women to like me? I'm a 28-year-old black male who's never been in a serious relationship or had vaginal intercourse. (I once paid a stripper to*

let me go down on her, but that's it.) I've tried dating apps and shooting my shot on Twitter, but I still get nothing. Am I doing something wrong? Am I just ugly? Am I doomed to a life of watching porn all the time and paying strippers? P.S.,

A: I am so grateful for this question. It is vulnerable, authentic and relatable. And you are already on track to solve your dilemma, so all I'm going to do is point that awesome energy toward some action. I have a five-phase strategy you can use to make yourself a masterful connector. Here's the lightning-round version.

1. Get to know yourself. This does not mean take yourself on a long romantic walk; it means start identifying the core of who you are and how you tend to interact with others. I suggest doing the Big Five Personality Test and an attachment-theory quiz to start. Invest some time in studying emotional intelligence to help you master your interpersonal life. Next, take what you've learned and get feedback from others; after all, the mirror cannot see itself. Since you don't have an ex, ask a close friend or family member how you can improve as a connector, and if you sense they're giving you answers to support your ego versus your growth, tell them you can handle the truth—and you need it in order to move forward.

2. Change yourself. Those are

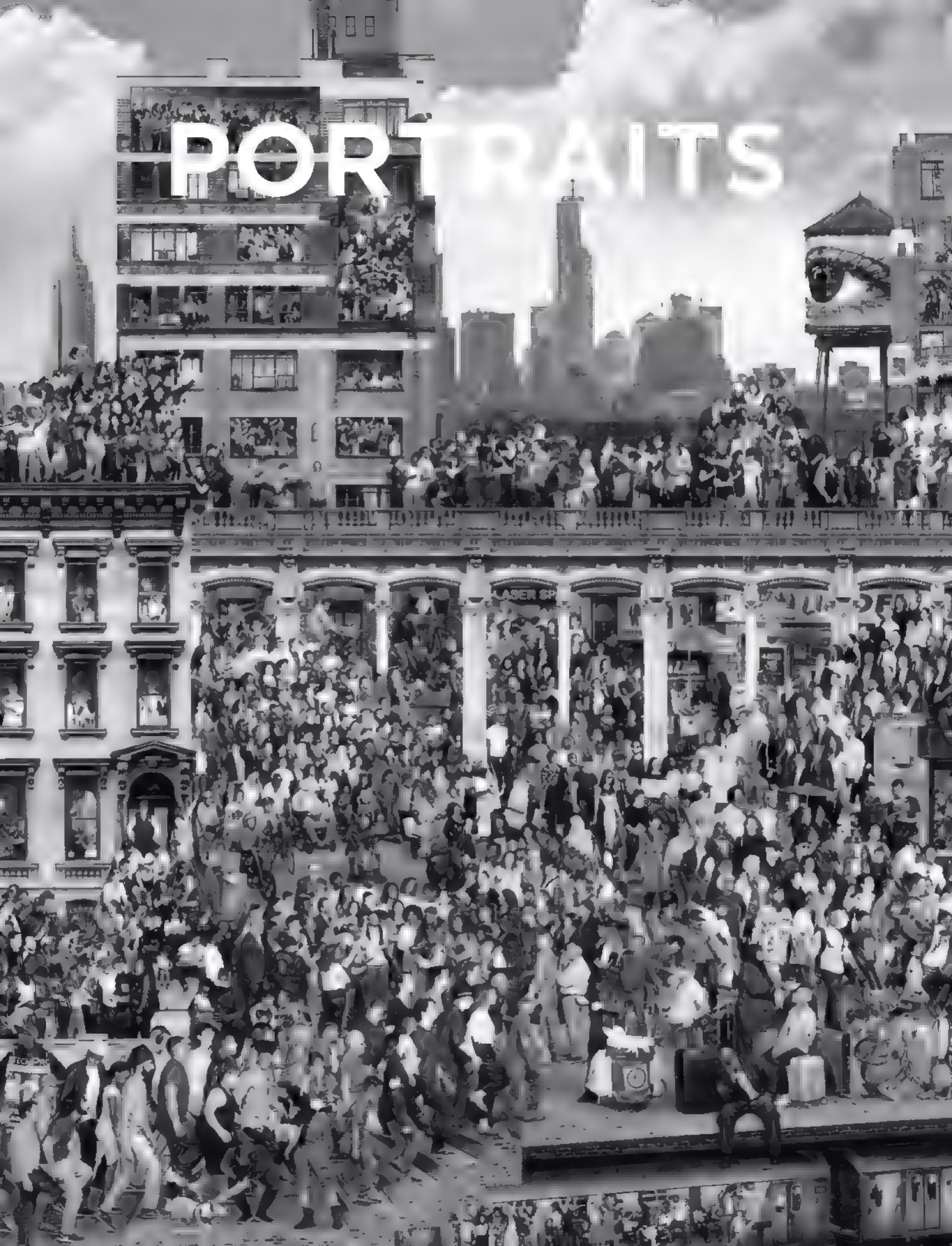
triggering words, I know, but change is the only constant; all you're doing is taking ownership over the process. Based on what you've learned through your self-assessment, start making small intentional changes so that who you know yourself to be and how people perceive you are more aligned.

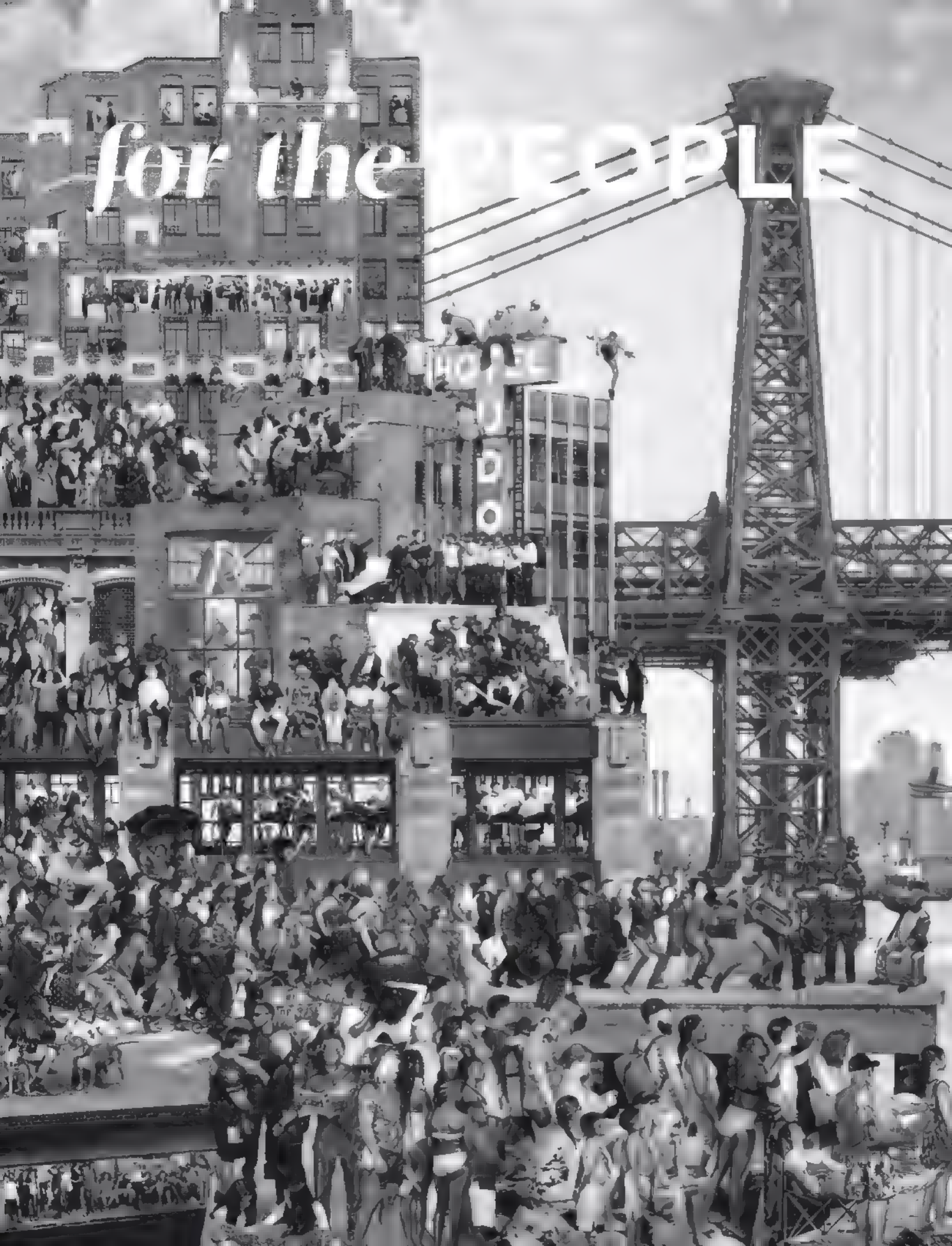
3. Learn from the greats. Once you've gotten good with you, start reading books or enlisting the help of experts to learn how to attract others. We're told that flirting, seduction, social intelligence, charisma, empathy, humor, strength and even attractiveness are traits we're simply born with, but in truth these are all skills that can be taught.

4. Practice, practice, practice. There's a reason pro athletes practice more than they play: If you can't do something when the stakes are low, you won't have a chance in hell of performing when pressure, nerves and clocks are in the mix. So learn to love socializing, start conversations with no agendas and be charming to everyone you meet. Not only will this make you a better dater; it will make your time on this planet more pleasant.

5. Set yourself up for success. Now that you're good with you and good with others, put yourself in environments that welcome, want and warrant the absolute best version of you. ■

PORTRAITS





for the PEOPLE

An eminent critic
and a boundary-
breaking artist
convene for a rare
tête-à-tête—and
demonstrate that
sometimes the
most powerful
insiders enter from
the outside

INTERVIEW BY **SHIRA TARRANT**
ART BY **JR**

"Ready...one, two, three!"

It's 4:30 p.m. on a Thursday, and JR and Jerry Saltz are jumping. The French artist and the Pulitzer Prize-winning art critic bend their knees and bounce, striking a running-man pose mid-flight. Behind them is *The Chronicles of New York City*, a 32-foot-wide, 21-foot-tall black-and-white mural featuring 1,128 New Yorkers of every age and ilk, from movie stars to cops. JR spent a year photographing and interviewing each of them before digitally collaging their portraits into a single, sweeping New York cityscape.

Click-click-click-click. A camera flashes, and their landing thuds echo through the Brooklyn Museum's Great Hall.

"Exactly," JR nods approvingly.

"Wait I have moobs!" exclaims Saltz, clutching his chest in mock distress. Laughter erupts from the smattering of people on Playboy's makeshift set.

Today marks the first time the two men have met, but they have much in common. In addition to being New Yorkers, both are self-taught outsiders. Saltz was a truck driver until the age of 41, and JR usually prefers open spaces to white walls who have become powerful insiders by insisting that art is for everyone, not just the people who flock to museums and auctions.

We're here for a private preview of JR. *Chronicles*, the artist's first major museum show in North America and his largest exhibit to date. Now 36 years old, he is best known for wheat-pasting colossal black-and-white portraits onto buildings,

bridges and the surfaces of geopolitical hot spots around the world. From favela matriarchs in Brazil to a toddler peering over a U.S.-Mexico border fence, his subjects are usually people whose portraits you wouldn't expect to see exhibited publicly, let alone at skyscraper scale.

The artist goes exclusively by his initials and usually dons shades and a fedora in public—an effort at semi-anonymity that ensures smooth passage across international borders. He also

reasons that disclosing his identity would pull focus away from his subjects and the conversations their portraits can spark. (Saltz calls him an "inclusive version of Banksy.")

The year 2019 was a big one for JR. In addition to unveiling the largest show of his career, the self-described "wallpaper artist" photographed Madonna for the cover of *The New York Times Magazine* and, in an astounding feat of tromp l'oeil, submerged the Louvre's glass pyramid in a moat of paper and glue. JR's *Chronicles*, a 20,000-square-foot survey on view in Brooklyn until May 2020, spans 15 years of his career and marks the first time the museum has dedicated its Great Hall to a single artist. The aforementioned *Chronicles of New York City*, which includes an audio recording of each subject, is arguably JR's most ambitious project yet. (You can hear each interview via the QR code that appears below.) Part love letter to New York and part Diego Rivera mural for the digital age, the artist calls his creation "a mirror of the city."

However you characterize it, the piece brings to life one of the most resonant qualities of JR's work: a multilayered expression of democratized art.

The day after a star-studded reception, during which the artist spent more time catching up with a local butcher than he did side-hugging Jake Gyllenhaal, JR and Saltz stroll the museum, going deep on the work and their unlikely paths to the upper echelons of the art world. Read on for a sliver of that hour-plus conversation, which touches on teenage arrests, the notion of "radical vulnerability," grandmothers, Robert De Niro, the power of failure and much more. *Elizabeth Suman*



Opening pages. *The Chronicles of New York City*, 2018–2019

Left: RQ, K, métro, Paris, France, 2002. JR started writing graffiti on walls at the age of 13, when he found a camera in the Paris Metro a few years later; he switched to covering them with portraits. **Opposite page:** *Rau, Louvre et le Secret de la Grande Pyramide*, 2019. Last spring, in celebration of the Louvre Pyramid's 30th birthday, the artist, using 2,000 paper strips and 400 volunteers, made the structure appear to be rising from a quarry.



SALTZ: Last night there were thousands of people here, from every walk of life. I saw Chris Rock. I saw Jake Gyllenhaal. But then I saw hundreds of people I never see in a museum — street artists, neighborhood people — and they were taking pictures and pointing at each other. And here we are, surrounded by a gigantic mural of the people and places of New York City that you've arranged. What is going on here?

JR: Like you said, it's people. And actually, even if last night you saw some people who might be more famous than others — well, if they're in this mural, they're not bigger than anyone else. It's not a group photo, it's a group of photos, where no one person is more important than another. So Robert De Niro, who was there last night, he's sitting on a stoop with other people, just blending in. And every single person here decided to represent themselves the way they wanted. I didn't decide how they were going to be represented. They decided.

SALTZ: It's like a mural of modern life for future historians. There are spectacular Renaissance murals in Venice and Rome, where painters were painting huge crowd scenes like this. Do you think of these as gigantic frescoes of a time and a place? It's a living encyclopedia.

JR: Definitely. This is exactly the same thing, but the contemporary version of it, which is that you can listen to every single person and hear what they have to say. And those interviews are not conducted. It's not like "How do you define yourself?" It's "Here's a mike; you say whatever you want to say. One day your grandchildren will hear it. What would you want to say?"

SALTZ: As a viewer, I can read or hear those interviews. But first is the optical impact. It's almost beyond real — overwhelming, breathtaking, incomprehensible. It's almost inhuman, like an insect-eye view of the world. How was this made?

JR: Well, it's a collage, so actually it's in the line of work I've been doing, because I'm a wallpaper artist at the end.

SALTZ: What's a wallpaper artist? Is that bad?

JR: No! I unroll strips on walls. People think I'm a photographer. I'm not. Photography is just part of my process. I'm an artist who uses paper as my main subject, and I paste it.

SALTZ: There are lots of mini-narratives and dramas. It's like 10,000 soap operas. There's a group of B-boys and another of firefighters. There might be a painter or a sculptor working.

JR: Yes. People just reading, people hugging in the middle of the city. It's a mirror of the city. I've lived here for almost nine





Above: 28 Mètres
Portrait of a Generation.
Braquage Lad Ly
by JR, Les Bosquets
Montferme 2004 JR's
semi-na work a portrait
of friend and filmmaker
Lad Ly wearing a video
camera. The piece led
to the series Portrait of a
Generation a response
to the media's portrayal
of young people from
the projects **Left:** 28
Mètres Face 2 Face
2007 For this, perhaps
the largest legal
photography exhibition
on record JR (and nuns)
pasted portraits of Arabs
and Jews, printed on
15,000 square feet of
paper in cities across
Israel and Palestine

years. Living here I had one vision of New York. But doing this mural is an excuse to go into every borough, into every neighborhood, and tap on anyone's shoulder and say, "Who are you?"

SALTZ: Let me ask a specific question. There are about 25 people in the center sucking on long, long straws. What the fuck is going on?

JR: Well, that was kind of a metaphor for all the people drinking juice all day and all the green juice in the city.

SALTZ: Right? It's insane. So that's a comment about how people are always trying to be healthy or they're busy. Are they sucking out our brains, mulling up the medicine?

JR: Yeah, it's this mixture.

SALTZ: Again, when I look at any one person, I can't really know if he's a movie star or an accountant or a gangster.

JR: Yes. But if you click on him, you'll have his name and his story—his story however he wishes to share it.

SALTZ: And then this makes me wonder... You're anonymous. I know you only as JR. You're wearing sunglasses and a very stylish hat.

JR: Thank you. I appreciate that.

SALTZ: And incredibly good-looking. It's a nightmare for somebody like me. And you have charisma, so that helps you with other human beings. But why anonymity? You're a cult, but only as this unknown, masked mark-maker, like Zorro or Batman.

JR: This show actually helps me explain that. In a work like this, it's no use at all.

SALTZ: They see your face?

JR: Yeah, most of the people saw my eyes, when I was in my photo truck.

SALTZ: You have peered over your glasses at me and then taken off your hat. Am I being seduced? What's up?

JR: Whenever there's a camera, I tend to put on the glasses and hat. The thing is, when I take them off, you would not even recognize me at the airport or in the street. You're like, "I don't know this person. Who is that?" Anonymity helped me when

I did work at the Mexico border. It was possible only because I could cross the border and they would not recognize me. I can go to Turkey and to the Middle East, and each time I have to pass police control or borders, I take my hat and glasses off, and I'm just

SALTZ: You're another person. Secret agents and assassins blend in too.

JR: Exactly.

SALTZ: But in the world of art and museums and galleries and your work, you're anonymous. Why?

JR: Well, because everything is connected. If a photo taken of us today is published without my hat and sunglasses, then when I'm at the border the next time, people will know my face. So I haven't done a photo since I was 13 years old that I don't have my sunglasses on.

SALTZ: Do you think if I knew that your name was "Jonathan Jones" and that you were from Holland that you would have trouble passing borders as a famous artist like this?

JR: Exactly. Look, when I did a project in Turkey, the city fined me. But they fined X, because they didn't have my name. I had to pay the fines through the company I rented the scaffolding from. They could never stop me when I left, but they would have if they knew my name was Jonathan Jones. Same with the border.

SALTZ: Genius. You could transport drugs, actually. In my world, the high artsy-fartsy art world, everybody has a name. It's stardom, the cult of the male star, in particular. You're that, but you're known only as JR. That's another layer of anonymity. Or is it another type of fame? Why that layer?

JR: Well, early on it started with graffiti.

SALTZ: What was your name?

JR: Face 3, but I would actually write "JR" a lot. Face 3 was really the early one. SALTZ: But that was just generic graffiti. I don't like the graffiti where they're just writing their names. The reason I don't like it is that no one breaks out of the graffiti convention. Everyone's work looks the same. Only the names are different.

JR: Exactly.

SALTZ: Then—and I don't want you to be touchy about this—I think you took a thought structure that came through Banksy, where he's very antagonistic to politics and economics, and you made that go gigantic. You took an idea of graffiti, broke the earliest, boring convention of name writing, combined it with muralists Diego Rivera,

For me, there's no taboo subject; it's about how deep you go.

as you've talked about. And then the paper; I think the paper is key for you.

JR: Yeah. Look, I wish I could say it in those words. It's probably right. The thing is you have to go back to when I was 17. I knew nothing about Banksy or about Shepard Fairey.

SALTZ: Can you say what year it was?

JR: It was exactly 2000.

SALTZ: And was Banksy a god? No. He was just an English guy.

JR: Exactly. Doing graffiti too, actually.

SALTZ: I heard a rumor he went to an expensive art school.

JR: I have never been to art school.

SALTZ: Me neither. No art in my life.

JR: That's why I love talking with you.

SALTZ: Art was for smart people.

JR: I think that's why I came so naturally into the art world. because I didn't even know there was an art world.

SALTZ: I have no degrees. I was a long-distance truck driver until the age of 41.

JR: I love that.

SALTZ: You started at 13?

JR: Yes, I'm 36 now. When I was 13, I started writing my name on the wall. When I was 16, a friend of mine came to me and said, "JR, I've got to stop graffiti because I think what we're doing here is we're a victim of a society of consumers. We're writing our name every day like all those brands around us." I was like, "Are you crazy?" Then it hit me, and I'm like, "You know what? I'm actually really bad at it anyway. I don't even know how to make a colorful painting. It's all the same." Luckily for me I found a camera, but photography was a rich sport. Photography was not accessible to everybody, and that's where I think if I was born 10 years earlier, there would be none of what I've done.

SALTZ: Because then you would've had to pay for film and developing—

JR: And travel. Low-cost travel arrived exactly in my generation.

The internet arrived exactly in my generation. So I didn't know Basquiat, Keith Haring.

SALTZ: You're an outsider, untrained.

JR: Completely.

SALTZ: And that's why you had to invent the entire process?

JR: To be honest, at 17, when I pasted the Champs-Élysées with my tiny photos [*Expo 2 Rue*], I thought I'd made it. I thought there was no other journey. My goal, as someone who grew up outside Paris, in the projects, was "I have to put my photos on the Champs-Élysées." And I did it!

SALTZ: People like me, creatures of the high-art world, weren't coming to your openings in the past five years. We've come only recently. What do you think of that?

JR: Well, for me it's getting more and more exciting, because, like last night, I can merge—my whole goal is to merge. Merge the worlds without high-class, low-class, famous, nonfamous. When people gather there, they realize they all have something in common. They've never met; now they're part of the same piece forever.

SALTZ: That seems like a big theme in your work. It isn't like Banksy, who says, "This is very bad." He's very pointed and harsh in his critiques of society, income inequality or whatever. You are without commentary, in a way.

JR: Who am I to comment?

SALTZ: Many of your pictures are just groupings of people. Why are they black and white?

JR: Black and white started because I wanted to differentiate myself from advertising, which I hold a big stand against. I haven't worked with any brand, any sponsor, any logo in 20 years.

no Louis Vuitton, Colgate or whatever at the entrance of the museum.

SALTZ: So if I was Louis Vuitton and said, "I'd love you to make us a gigantic picture," you would say—

JR: And you bring me \$20 million, I still say no.

SALTZ: You would say, "I will make it for \$20 million but no insignia."

JR: Even then, I wouldn't even start a discussion.

SALTZ: How do you make money now?

JR: Most of my work doesn't make money. But one percent of it ..

SALTZ: Like a lot of artists.

JR: Yeah, 99 percent doesn't make money, but the one percent makes enough to publish the rest.

SALTZ: You self-financed to get here and become this artist you are now.

JR: Exactly. I self-finance, or sometimes there's a foundation or someone.

SALTZ: How did you self-finance 10 years ago?

JR: Even with my first project in the projects outside Paris, all my friends pooled some money. Each of them gave 50 bucks, 100 bucks. So I know I don't need to have a 100-person studio in the most impressive building to be functioning. I know I can function with nothing, because I did it.

SALTZ: You have a real affinity for women, powerful women. What do you think accounts for that? I don't want to ruin your anonymity, but does this connect to your mother?

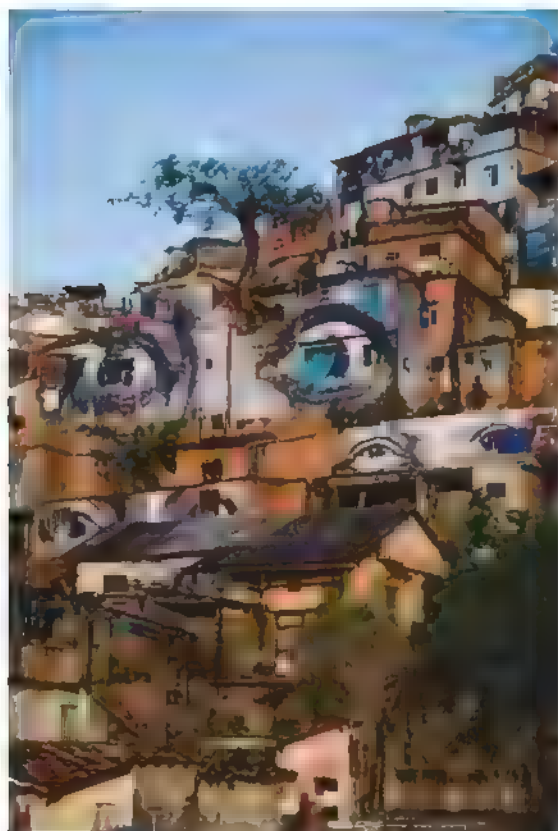
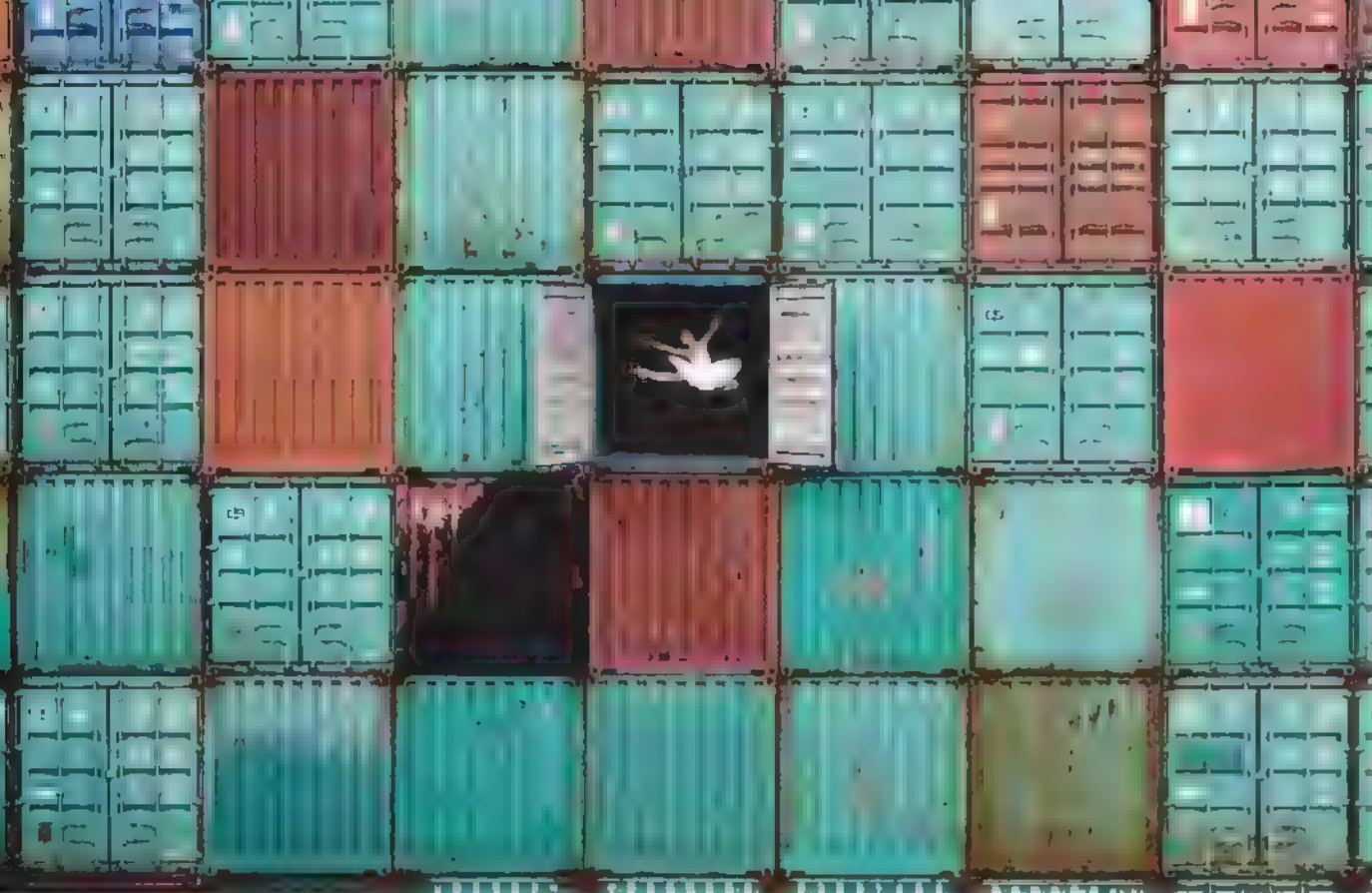
JR: Yeah. I grew up living with my grandmother but also taking care of elderly women in my building, in the projects.

SALTZ: Would I have heard of the place you grew up?

JR: It's a project a bit like the one where I took most of my photos, but another one.

SALTZ: Okay. So you were middle-class, roughly.

JR: Yeah, low middle-class.

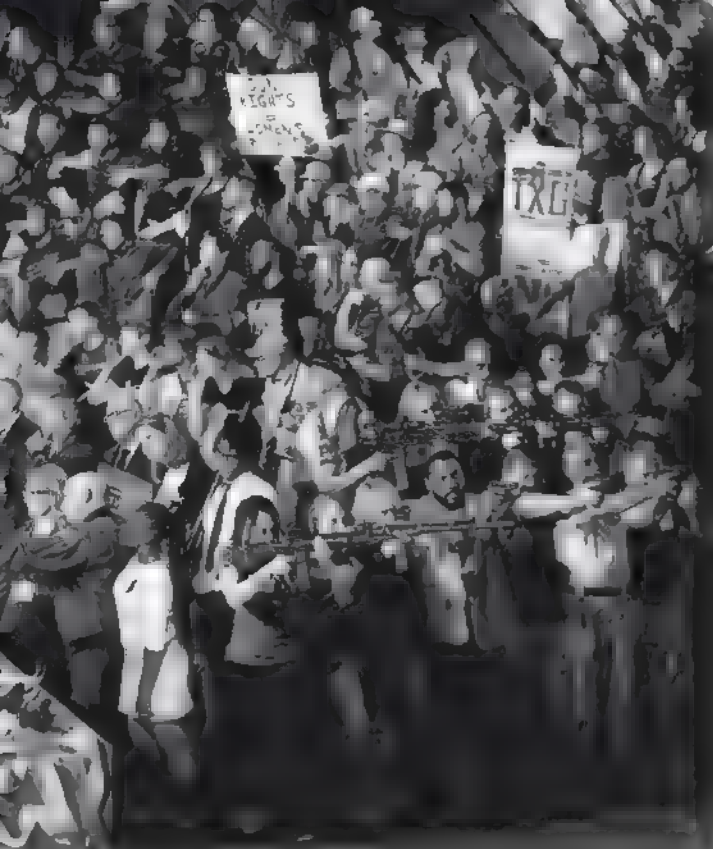


Top: The Ballerina Jumping in Containers, Frankie, 2014. Considering his penchant for jumping, R's affinity for dance is unsurprising. In 2014, he choreographed a production for the New York City Ballet. **Above:** Favela Morro da Providência, 2013. In 2013, R became the first artist to win a TED Prize. He put the prize toward the launch of his ongoing, interactive project, which allows anyone anywhere to organize portrait pastings. **Left:** 28 Mimiéres: Women Are Heroes, Act 1, Favela Morro da Providência, 2008. A scene from Women Are Heroes, a 2008–2014 project that focuses on portraits of women living in areas of conflict.



Above: A portrait from *Wrinkles at the City* (Los Angeles, 2011). A 2008 *LR* awarded film on going project that examines age. **Far left:** A statement *LR* passed portraits of people across L.A. as a rumination on the city's focus on superficial beauty. **Right:** Migrants. *Mayra Pérez Across the Border* (2017) is the *LR*'s best known work. Its 2017 award project *Key to a Queen* (photograph of a Mexican teenager) is also a *CA* film. A surfer fence. He makes the final day of the project by staging a trans-border celebration on featuring the eyes of a dreamer.





SALTZ. So you have a mother. Did she approve of the JR entity when he would run around? Were you on drugs in those days?

JR. I never drank or took drugs, but I was into groups of friends fighting

SALTZ: Did you fight?

JR. Yes, and I had a lot of trouble with the police at that age

SALTZ. Did you carry a gun?

JR: No, but my friend did. Or knives. And I have to say, at that time my parents were really worried. One day, I remember the police called them, and they had to come pick me up in Paris because I was arrested for graffiti. My mom was like, "What did he do?" They said, "Well, he tagged on the wall." And she was like, "Oh, and you want me to come all the way to Paris because he tagged on the wall? Well, you can keep him." *Boom* And so that day I was like, "Okay, I'll find myself a passion." Then I have a goal: My goal is to make that roof, however I get there. It's to go into that tunnel, however I do it. And then slowly I started changing from the groups of friends who were just making trouble to the groups of friends who were looking to climb the highest building or TV antenna

SALTZ: I think your work is changing right now. I think something's going on. I know something *needs to change* so you're not just this fancy-pants big photo-mural guy with a hat and sunglasses

JR. Well, I hope to constantly be changing

SALTZ. You need to be changing, because

otherwise, like most graffiti artists and you're not that they get one style and that's it. That isn't a good thing, JR. Are you boxing yourself in, becoming just another visual brand?

JR. But that's why I directed a ballet. I made a film with Agnès Varda. That's why I'm always pushing myself in areas I don't know anything about, always.

SALTZ. Right

JR. Because I want to fail I think there's nothing better than trying a project where there's more failure than success. I put myself in this constantly, and I think that if not, there's no point to being an artist if you're doing everything the same that people like because it works

SALTZ: That's just product.

JR. Yeah, exactly So I didn't choose that journey to just repeat myself

SALTZ. Samuel Beckett said, "Try again, fail again, fail better."

JR. Exactly

SALTZ: Well, wow, JR. This is an amazing journey you've taken. I feel lucky in a way you don't normally do press like this. What made you say yes to *playboy*? You're not being paid, there's no dough here. And it's, um, *playboy*

JR. You know, one thing I realized a couple of years ago when I stopped doing press is that I had so much more time. I didn't have to wake up at seven a.m. to go to a radio station. I also realized that often you don't have the space to talk. If we were talking for 10 minutes, however great you are in 10 minutes, it doesn't get to the depths of the work. So it's better that people don't know about it. When I put my work on the street, it's not even signed. It's only the people who want to find out what it is who will find out. If not, they walk every day in front of a black-and-white image not knowing what it is. So the reason I said yes to this interview is really because we would have space, and also when I heard I could meet you and we could have this conversation

SALTZ: That's why I said yes, because I never interview artists. Ever. I always think I don't want them to tell me what they think, I want to say what I think. You made your work, now I want to tell you what I see. And in your latest work especially, I see real art

JR. Thank you. I could speak for hours like this, because for me, there's no taboo subject, it's about how deep you go

SALTZ. No taboo. Radical vulnerability. Time to push the outer boundaries of what you can do now.

JR. Exactly. ■







BE YOUR NATURAL SELF

Cristal

Instagram @cristalplayboy_official

Photographers Mike Cohen | @Mikecohenphotos









What inspired you to start your career, and how has your journey evolved over time?

I never dreamt that one day I would be in Playboy, it's a blessing. It's like a fairy tale, how an ordinary girl from a small town in Poland, who had to overcome many hardships throughout her life, ends up on the cover of Playboy. My biggest dream has come true. The Playboy invitation has helped me believe in myself even more. It has given me a lot of hope and belief that everything is possible and the world is waiting for me. An unforgettable experience that I will remember for the rest of my life. Thank you, I dream of a happy family and achieving my goals. I want to establish a Foundation for children with Tourette's syndrome. It's a cause close to my heart for certain reasons. My greatest dream is to complete a biography about my life. It was not a bed of roses with many tears and sacrifices. It will include my memories and motivate people to never give up and have faith the sun always comes after the storm.

What has been the most defining moment of your professional life so far?

The most beautiful things in my life always happen by accident. I remember the feeling of excitement when I received an invitation to the first Playboy. An unforgettable feeling. Then came the next invitations from Playboy and now I can reveal that there will be more in the future and other magazines, interviews, my guest appearances in artists' video clips. All this helped me believe in myself, in the fight against complexes, but above all, interacting and working with all these wonderful people: photographers, models, and musicians created me as an artist and decided to start my own perfume brand which is created entirely by me and the scents are inspired by my memories from traveling to my magical places and my cosmetic brand to leave some kind of legacy and be able to fulfill my dreams about a foundation supporting young talents and people with autism.

Who has been your biggest influence or role model throughout your journey?

I am a big fan of Lady Gaga because she is a multi-talented person as a singer and actress/dancer but she also has a very interesting character and her vision of looking at the world motivates and inspires. From the world of Playboy, it is definitely Pamela Anderson but also Anna Nicole Smith. Many people tell me that I am supposedly similar to her. haha. I recommend watching documentaries about their lives on Netflix they are very inspiring.

What does a typical day in your life look like?

When I wake up I squeeze fresh orange juice, I look through my mail and go to the

park with my dog. Then when I come back I make my favorite coconut latte macchiato, tabouleh salad, definitely with pomegranate seeds and fresh mint. I put on my favorite music and that's my time for meditation. Then some yoga exercises a few deep breaths and I'm ready for the whole day. My daily routine includes photo shoots for magazines, interviews, make-up, hairdresser, beautician. I go to the factory where we create perfume scents in the laboratory. I'm just finishing work on my own line of make-up and candles and a refreshers for the home. Every day of mine is intense but I love it. When I have a lot of things to do, I feel alive.

Do you have any hidden talents, if so what is it?

I love helping others, this is the meaning of my life, especially for children with autism and Tourette's. Thanks to hard work, I managed to create my own cosmetic brand, design my own perfume scents, and all this in order to establish a Foundation for children with Tourette's syndrome. It's a cause close to my heart for certain reasons. My greatest dream is to complete a biography about my life. It was not a bed of roses with many tears and sacrifices. It will include my memories and motivate people to never give up and have faith the sun always comes after the storm.

How do you stay motivated and focused in a fast-paced industry?

From my experience, if you are very busy you don't focus on details but on organizational issues and think this is the key to success. You just have to remember about healthy eating and the rest will take care of itself. Because when I am very busy and have a tight schedule I can find more free time than when I have a looser schedule. It turns me into a business and then I don't have time for anything.

What's your philosophy when it comes to balancing work and personal life?

My philosophy on work-life balance is to prioritize intentionality and flexibility, meaning actively managing my time to dedicate quality moments to both my professional commitments and personal well-being. Understanding that the balance may shift depending on life circumstances, while always striving to maintain a healthy separation between the two spheres to avoid burnout.

What's one thing you do every day to keep yourself grounded and happy?

Staying grounded means for me being able to stay calm and connect with my core self in the face of uncertainty. Practicing physical wellness. Exercise daily, eat nutritious food, and prioritize quality sleep, spend time in nature, connecting with your senses, listen to music that reminds you of something positive. All

of these little things are rituals that make you feel better even in life sometimes can be hard and can be like balm for body and spirit. Repeating positive statements. Say kind statements to yourself, or repeat coping or safety statements.

What are some hobbies or passions you enjoy outside of work?

I love helping others, this is the meaning of my life, especially for children with autism and Tourette's. Thanks to hard work, I managed to create my own cosmetic brand. I design my own perfume scents, and all this in order to establish a Foundation for children with Tourette's syndrome. It's a cause close to my heart for certain reasons. My greatest dream is to complete a biography about my life. It was not a bed of roses with many tears and sacrifices. It will include my memories and motivate people to never give up and have faith the sun always comes after the storm.

If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would it be and why?

Modeling allows me to travel a lot, thanks to it I have visited many interesting places but there is still a lot to discover. I think that the places not really of great importance but the people you are around, they create places. You can be on a paradise beach alone with no one to talk to and enjoy the views together and then you have the impression that it doesn't matter where but with whom. You can be at home in front of the TV watching Netflix and have someone to cuddle up to - then you are in paradise. As I said earlier, places are created by people, not the other way around.

Do you have a favorite book, movie, or song that inspires you?

This is Playboy Africa and it's amazing that this question is asked in this interview because I immediately think of a very special song, "Wonka" by the artist Base Woly which has always accompanied me in very amazing moments of my life and was close to my heart long before I accidentally met the rapper who created it on the street and for a long time after that. I still didn't know it was his song. Some time later I appeared as a guest in his music video. Another one is "million reasons" by Lady Gaga and "my way" by Elvis Presley. My favorite book and movie is "The Secret".

What's one fun fact about you that most people don't know?

People still do not know many things about me, for example that I have a career as an athlete in sprints and running, an ideal in many Olympics, so if I had not become a model and a producer of cosmetics and perfumes, I would probably be a famous athlete and in the meantime I would build schools in Africa and a water network to enable people to have access to



drinking water. That would be my previous plan, but life is one big surprise. That is why the invitation from Playboy has a very symbolic meaning for me.

What advice would you give to someone looking to follow in your footsteps? Be your natural self. Don't try to change under the pressure of others. Even if stones land on your face every day, be strong and fight adversity, think positively. I am the best example of the impossible being possible. In moments of failure, don't waste time analyzing your mistakes. They are your lesson for a better future. It takes a tough time to find a solution. Be brave and try hard. If you don't try, you won't drink champagne. Stay strong and believe yourself and your dreams will come true.

How do you approach challenges or setbacks, and what keeps you going? When facing challenges or

setbacks, I try to approach them with a growth mindset, viewing them as opportunities to learn and improve, rather than failures that define me. This allows me to stay motivated by focusing on what I can control, analyzing what went wrong, and adjusting my strategy accordingly. What keeps me going is the belief that progress, even in the face of setbacks, is still moving me closer to my goals, coupled with the positive energy from celebrating small wins and seeking support from others.

What message do you hope to convey through your work? As above, before, by not judging people by their cover to support and help each other and not be jealous and selfish. Every day try to be the

best version of yourself and treat others how you would like to be treated. Be your natural self. Don't try to change under the pressure of others. Even if stones land on your face every day, be strong and fight adversity, think positively. I

am the best example of the impossible being possible. Stay strong and believe yourself and your dreams will come true. Thank you for spending this time getting to know me. Always sending you love & best wishes. Cristal xx.





THE PLAYBOY SYM POS IUM

Pleasure, despite its infinite sources, is pleasure only once it passes through our senses. We asked five heavyweights, from an A-list director to an orgasm curator, to pick a sense and run with it; the following essays might just change the way you see, hear, smell, taste and touch the world

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAURIZIO DI IORIO

Chlorine and Brunettes

BY COLMAN ANDREWS

The eight-time James Beard Award winner and co-founder of *Saveur* magazine muses on the gateway to memory

It is the oldest of the senses and arguably the most useful. Even the single-cell organisms that preceded us by eons possessed a form of smell and used it to appraise their environment. More immediately and vividly even than vision—which has become the predominant human sense—smell can alert us to danger, invigorate or calm us, seduce us sexually or stimulate our appetites.

Smell is also the most treacherous of the senses. It can sneak up on us and stick a dagger in our hearts. A few stray molecules of perfume drifting through the air—invisible, unexpected—can turn our lives upside down in an instant. Suddenly, heartbreakingly, it's as if you're there with her again, drawn by her scent into an aching reminiscence of everything attached to it. Her voice, her eyes, her skin.

Smell affects us this way because it's more intimately and strongly linked to memory and emotion than the other senses, and because scent memory persists long after its visual and auditory counterparts have begun to fade. Vision, hearing, touch and taste get to us indirectly. They transmit information to the cerebral cortex, the part of the brain that gives meaning to our sensory input, by way of the thalamus, a kind of relay station that passes stimuli along to the appropriate corner of the cranium.

The nose, on the other hand, is hardwired—hot-wired straight into the forebrain. Odors are picked up by receptor cells in the nostrils and from there speed without detour to an organ called the olfactory bulb. This connects directly to the limbic system, which regulates much of what we remember and how we feel. New research suggests that the bulb itself might even store memories, making the connection even faster and more intimate. No wonder a waft of perfume can teleport us so instantly and tauntingly.

I'm not sure how old I was when I first started paying attention to the way things smell. As a kid, I took my senses for granted, as most of us probably do. They were just there. In the case of smell, I figured out early on that some aromas pleased me (burgers on the grill, fresh-mown grass, wood smoke), others didn't (sweaty gym socks, garlic breath, rotten eggs), and I thought no more about it.

Gradually, as I accumulated life experience, I started noticing the scent of things more consciously and associating aromas with memories. One night early in my romantic career I had a kind of olfactory epiphany, realizing how capricious scent memory could be. I had gone to bed with a tall, soft brunette at her West Hollywood apartment, where I found the intense odor of chlorine bleach on her just-washed sheets almost too distracting. I was suddenly back in the swimming pools of my childhood, splashing in the sun, far too young for romance. (When the sense of touch took over, that

memory happily receded and my olfactory system stored better memories instead.)

I think my olfactory life began to bloom in earnest when I was in my mid-20s and starting to learn about wine. Wine tasting, I quickly figured out, is mostly wine smelling. Literal tasting is important to detect things like acidity, tannins and viscosity, but everything else comes through the olfactory bulb, even (or especially) the wine's actual flavor. What wine lovers call "nose," or the way wine smells in the glass, depends on thousands of sense references, most of which we don't even know we have. Scientists believe the human nose is capable of detecting at least 1 trillion different odors.

These are what make malbec taste different from pinot noir and German riesling different from its California counterpart, and a lot of what disposes us to like good wine better than bad.

Describing the aromas of wine is difficult, however, and wine writers tend to get a little wacky in their attempts. Wines, if you believe the critics, smell like black cherry, red cherry, dried cherry, lemon peel, gingerbread, smoke, tobacco, creosote, coffee, leather, spring flowers, autumn leaves, damp stone, cat pee, manure. Some of these descriptors are nonsensical. I recently saw "salted nuts" evoked to describe the nose of a chardonnay; sorry, but you can't smell salt.

Others make perfect sense. Wine aged in new oak barrels, for instance, often smells like vanilla because both vanilla and oak contain a phenolic aldehyde called vanillin. There's a hint of geraniums in muscat because both the muscat grape and geranium leaves contain an aromatic compound called geraniol.

I tend to cut wine writers some slack, in any case, because an interesting thing about smell is that it doesn't have much of a vocabulary of its own. We have unequivocal ways of describing what we see (blue, square, hazy), hear (soft, discordant, high pitched), feel (firm, hot, bumpy) and taste (salty, sour, sweet). Most of our descriptors for aroma, though, are metaphorical: That smells skunky, grassy, fresh, like apples, pine needles, gasoline.

We each develop our own associations, of course. Skunky to me might be buttery to you. Where I find apples, you might find pears. The perfume that reminds me of a lost love could summon a crazy aunt or nasty boss in your mind. The garlicky aromas drifting out the back door of the Thai restaurant down the street might make you queasy while they just make me want to dig into a bowl of khao soi. And the pungent smell of chlorine bleach, quite reasonably, makes many people gag. But it sometimes still reminds me of swimming pools, and brunettes. ■



Bring On the Vomit

BY PAUL FEIG

The lauded comedic director (*Bridesmaids*, *Ghostbusters*, the upcoming *Last Christmas*) on the joys of making you laugh without depending on dialogue

When I was in film school back in the 1980s, the goal was to tell a story visually. That's why the old silent films are so interesting

even though some have dialogue cards, the best don't have very many. Movies started as an exclusively visual medium. With the advent of sound, you were able to explain more things through dialogue, and people got used to witty banter and clever exchanges. Sometimes, we as writers fall back on that as a crutch. For me, the great challenge is to tell something visually

Part of the emphasis on verbal storytelling comes from the process of script writing. The joke is that when studio executives read a script, they read just the dialogue—they skip over all the action and description. I don't know if that's true, but there are times when you feel that way. You'll write something out visually—the way something happens to a character, or what they're observing and how they're processing it—and then you'll get notes that the audience isn't going to understand *this* and *this*. Generally, when you're addressing notes, you're writing dialogue to explain everything

As filmmakers, we write all this exposition to shore something up, but the minute two actors get together, so much is spoken visually, through their facial expressions, the positioning of their bodies, the way they're interacting spatially with each other. You assume you have to explain this and this, but then two charismatic actors appear on-screen and the minute they see each other, the audience goes, "They're gonna fall in love."

For the sex scene between Kristen Wiig and Jon Hamm that begins *Bridesmaids*, we choreographed it like a dance and a fight at the same time. That's what made us laugh. Let's start this movie by just blasting it out of the gate with a woman who's in a really bad relationship. You watch it and immediately think, My God,

this poor thing. (Of course, if you watch my more recent film, *A Simple Favor*, you'll realize I do the exact same thing every time I shoot a sex scene. It always starts in a wide shot, and as they hit the bed, I slowly push in and land on somebody's face. And that's about it.)

When Melissa McCarthy does her first kill in *Spy*, she gets in a fight with this guy who falls off a ledge and has a horrible death. She sees it and throws up on him, then drops the knife on him. That's a very big visual, physical gag; as an audience member, you instantly go, "If I killed somebody, I would probably throw up." It's about finding what is visually attached to the story you're telling.

I shot my new movie, *Last Christmas*, entirely in central London. Even though it's a fairly verbal story of two people falling in love, it's important that the visuals augment it to make you feel like you're there. So that's another level of visuals, providing a beautiful backdrop for the verbal.

It can be the hardest thing in the world for a director to figure out which movie to do next. But making films with female leads is all I've ever wanted to do. I really relate to women, and female characters have been portrayed so poorly on the screen for so long. I know so many funny, talented women, and a lot of female audience members weren't seeing themselves in certain roles because of the language of movies and Hollywood's patriarchal view of the world. The men were the heroes, and the women were the ones at home. And that's not aspirational at all. Who watches that and goes, "Cool, I can't wait to be one of these nagging wives who tell the hero he's got to have dinner with the family instead of going out and stopping that nuclear bomb from blowing up the city"? Everybody wants to be the hero. The women in my life are all very heroic.

I was really drawn to doing *Ghostbusters* because the idea of the original movie is so great: funny, smart people trying to defeat the supernatural with technology. It's so rich for more exploration. I told the studio, "You can't make this small." It has to be big and visual, which is why we did it in 3-D and came up with new tricks, like shooting the proton stream through the IMAX screen's black bars. Honestly, my favorite way to watch our movie is in IMAX, because it's such a different—and completely visual—experience.

What I love about what I do is we have to get it right only once. A lot of times we go in not knowing if we can get it right, and then there's that lightning-in-a-bottle moment when two actors connect, or some stunt goes a way you didn't think it would, or a train goes through the background of your shot right when you didn't expect it. That's what's so wonderful about the visual. You lock in time every single element you wanted to control or wanted to create or were lucky enough to find. It's these moments that bring that visual energy to an audience, and they get to watch it for hundreds of years after. ■



Taste Takes Time

BY MARINA TWEED

The Gourmand founder and editor in chief wants us to slow down and cultivate a discerning palate

Be it food or information, the more substance we (thoughtfully) consume, the more we gain. Our personal likes and dislikes are what make us interesting, and we can develop these preferences only through experience. So how, in a world of instant gratification, do we keep our sense of taste both individual and refined?

Everybody eats, but food is about so much more than just eating. My partner and I founded *The Gourmand* as a means to talk not just about food but about the culture that surrounds it. To tell the stories of people who are inspired by eating and drinking whether they're artists or writers, filmmakers or chefs, designers or musicians—we talk to them about their inspirations, aspirations and experiences. The journal is also a place for us to collaborate with photographers, set designers and illustrators to produce photo essays, still-life features and documentary imagery, all inspired by the endlessly creative field of food. As editors, we see the magazine as a culmination of our personal interests and ideas, and its pages as a testament to food's communicative power. Essentially, *The Gourmand* is about taste—in every sense of the word.

The predominant purpose of taste is to keep us alive, to prevent us from eating poison. It's essential to our evolution, designed to entice us to eat a varied diet and stay in good health. And of course it provides the utter pleasure of eating.

We also use the word taste to describe our leanings in music, art, fashion, film or anything else with which we surround our physical or psychological selves. And the same word has been adopted to describe an experience—a taste of something new. On all counts, taste is one of the key ingredients that make us who we are.

• • •

Taste buds are composed of some 50 to 100 taste-receptor cells bundled together on the tongue and epiglottis (the protective flap in the throat). These receptors are responsible for the detection of various tastes, commonly distinguished as sweet, salty, bitter, sour and umami. But it's the gustatory cortex in our brain that processes

taste, and it is this part of the brain we can teach how to taste. By feeding it with information, chefs, sommeliers, food analysts anyone—can expand their sensory knowledge of flavor.

Taste takes time to develop, and it all starts in the womb. A fetus develops taste buds that can detect strong flavors through the amniotic fluid from as early as 13 weeks in utero. Once a baby is born, flavors can be passed on through the mother's breast milk. As the milk changes according to the mother's diet, the baby's library of flavors broadens.

Exposure to flavors at an early age contributes to the tolerance of certain foods. I was very aware of this while weaning my firstborn, and now at the age of four he enjoys eating spicy food as much as he does beans on toast. Flavor exposure enables children to accept foods within their culture—and explains why they may have an aversion toward other flavors.

Our taste in food is not something we're born with; it can be learned and refined over time, and the same is true of our cultural tastes. Fetuses can hear from as early as 18 weeks, and taking in sounds at such an early age helps familiarize them with the world they're about to enter. As with our taste in food, our taste in music is something we have to find; We can learn what we like or don't like only through discovery.

This journey of discovery is infinite. Throughout our lives our tastes can evolve as we're exposed to economic, ethical and environmental factors. I for one float between being a "free-form" carnivore to a fish-eating vegan depending on where I am in the world, what my body craves and what I've recently read or watched. And some things we can just outgrow (though I can't imagine I'll ever stop loving vanilla ice cream).

Our tastes are realized through knowledge and experience. Be it food, music, art or wine, we get the most out of the things we put the most into. It's key to our development that we allow ourselves the time to discover, experiment, play and digest. But in this age—when we can shop a pop star's look while Alexa queues up that same artist's latest album, or google the latest superfood as our fridge orders groceries, or Instagram the art others have "curated" for us while an algorithm selects films to watch on Netflix—time is hard to come by. Are we missing out on the exploration of our personal likes and dislikes, the adventure of discovering them and the pleasure of consuming them? Through social media and the amplification—as opposed to cultivation—of our own tastes, are we in fact not learning enough about ourselves?

Perhaps we should avoid being told what's in good taste, stop following the tastemakers and take the time to discover things for ourselves. After all, home-cooked food always tastes much better than ready-made. ■



I See What I Hear

BY SACHA JENKINS

From the Emmy-nominated creator of Showtime's Wu-Tang Clan: Of Mics and Men, a love letter to the songs and sounds that made him dream—and live

Music is cinematic. When this scribe listens to music, I see things that don't exist. Yet. Melody has the ability to score the scoreless. It has the ability either to combine imagination with desire to create something brand new or to pump to the surface feelings that have been bubbling deep below the recesses of the flesh.

It all boils down to the endless possibilities that sound offers us. Maybe we learned from nature, because nature is an accomplished musician. Sea breezes, bird chirps, cricket shrieks, a fallen tree that no human was around to hear make its last splash, a volcano popping off. I'm talking about the original bangin' beats right there. Somebody famously said that the hills are alive with the sound of music. Said individual wasn't bullshitting.

In nature, the duty of sound is to represent the life force of the immediate environment. This is why hip-hop is so appealing. The sound and culture are a reflection of and a reaction to their immediate surroundings. When you listen to Public Enemy's *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, you hear sirens and air-raid alarms booming behind Chuck D's growl, the way you would hear Sitting Bull's wail accompanied by hawks and stampeding bison on the Lakota plains. The Bomb Squad—the chief architects of that classic PE sound—was referencing the chaos of everyday inner-city life in their fearless narratives. Most bomb squads deactivate bombs, Hank and Keith Shocklee and Eric "Vietnam" Sadler dropped them on our heads.

For years, I was a music journalist. I had the great fortune of spending time with the Gs of the era I represent: Nas, 50 Cent, Eminem, Roxanne Shanté. Their childhood experiences had a heavy hand in the music they would make. The chaos and trauma they faced as shorties would be documented in their lyrics and supported and amplified by producer greats like DJ Premier, Dr. Dre, Marley Marl and Pete Rock—men who also knew the maddening sounds of the hood all too well. Still, they were masters who reimagined ugliness and pain, trumpeters who honored the beauty in the struggle and the triumph that awaits after the last bar and beat fade.

As a director of films, I can assure you that there's a music

video of my own playing in my mind for every song I love, even if a video already exists for it. When I watch TV, I don't see images or have visions of objects or people other than the ones I see flashing before me. Television is literal. Linear. Binary. Which is fine if you want to stay inside the places these programs can take you.

But sound has an algebraic quality, shrouded and mysterious (at least to me) yet definitive. Important. Nurturing and warm. Necessary and essential. The sounds that vibrate here on earth? There is an abundance. Hip-hop has mastered the idea and manifestation of the so-called sound collage, pointing country music in the direction of disco, in the direction of jazz, in the direction of zydeco and so on. For many of us coming up around the way, the infinite textures of hip-hop music nurtured us and took us to places our parents couldn't afford to. In hip-hop we heard Africa, the place our public schools often characterized as "uncivilized." We heard the sounds of Africa in our "black" American music, which helped us better understand who we are. Maybe I hadn't physically been to Africa at that point, but by my teens, I damn sure knew what it sounded like.

When you take the time to count all the distinct sounds and styles that hip-hop has touched, you realize that the keepers of the culture are actually mad scientists, melding together strands of DNA often kept separated by the nightmare that has soiled the American dream for those of us who are a tad bit darker than baby blue.

As for those music videos in my mind, my American dream goes like this. Whenever I hear that Smashing Pumpkins joint "Cherub Rock" off *Siamese Dream*, I see teenage black girls rockin' those percussive cheerleader steps and chants (there's Africa!) in sync with Jimmy Chamberlin's rattlesnake-y littledrummer-boy snare runs (Africa again!). To me, my vision is akin to what happens when your chocolate winds up in someone else's peanut butter—delicious.

Another great song: Kool G Rap's "Take 'Em to War" (also featuring B-1 and MF Grimm). It's ominous, haunting and sneaky in the way the bass lick is massaged into your cranium. Then Grimm's words seep in: "Fuck what you heard, crime pays / And always, unorthodox, I hold my pistol sideways / We kill crews, hearts go numb / And if retaliation comes then yo, fuck it, it just comes."

With this I see a gaggle of disgruntled employees hovering around a water cooler, scheming how to physically remove their CEO. Suits and ties suddenly taking the law into their own hands—which is essentially what Kool G and crew are doing inside the song. When someone interjects, "Fuck Pataki," they're railing against then governor of New York George Pataki's long-ass arm of the law. G Rap and company weren't donning suits, though strictly ski masks and leather gloves.

This is what I see because life often apes art, and the sounds we hear are married to the moments we experience in real time. Shit is wilder than the jungle. ■



Touch Is More Than Touch

BY EMMA KOENIG

Your skin has a mind of its own, and other musings from the writer behind *Moan: Anonymous Essays on Female Orgasm*

Years ago, I had an uncomfortable sexual experience. As much as I wanted to surrender to bliss, nothing felt good, and the other person did not pick up on my nonverbal signals: my tense body, my blank face, my silence. He assumed my experience was a positive one.

Most of us think we're smart enough, poised enough and experienced enough to do the "right" thing in scenarios like this. We think we'll be able to identify why we're uncomfortable and voice our concerns in a strong yet sensitive, yet *casual* tone. But in that moment, I couldn't speak up. It wasn't until later that I could name the cause: I'd wanted to be polite. Overwhelmed by the physical sensation, I had unconsciously prioritized his experience over mine. (Apparently he and I had that in common.)

As I started to examine all the things that had led up to this moment of self-imposed silence, I was struck by a need to immerse myself in the sexual experiences of others. I spent years collecting women's stories surrounding orgasm and sexuality, which eventually became the book *Moan: Anonymous Essays on Female Orgasm*. I was striving to create something that explored the spectrum of female desire, both the joys and the frustrations. Digesting all those stories, and the reader reactions they inspired, led to the deceptively simple conclusion that touch is about way more than touch.

We've all seen the articles filled with tips on the best angles to hit the right points to have the best orgasm of our lives! And though I support anything that helps us zero in on feeling good, it's myopic to talk about sex as though it were an exercise class, where the most important factors are form and reps. Perhaps now more than ever, our sexual health—our sexual *morality*—demands that we consider the abstract forces informing our most enveloping of physical faculties.

TOUCH IS CULTURAL

Here's an exercise. Make a list of all the ways the country has changed in regard to sex and gender since the time you first had sex. (This won't work as well if you lost your virginity yesterday, but in this insane, 24-hour news cycle-nightmare from the depths of hell, it could still apply!)

What's on your list? Maybe it cites medical advancements such as the HPV vaccine, the FDA approval of PrEP or the over-the-counter liberation of Plan B. Maybe it dips into the advent of social media, which has nurtured cyber-harassment, revenge porn and the incel movement. Maybe it includes #MeToo, the growing media representation of LGBTQIA people, the latest threats to abortion access or the fact that our president has 17 (at press time) allegations of sexual misconduct against him.

The backdrop of our sex lives is under constant construction, and so is our relationship to touching and being touched. We're

contending with new information, attitudes, language and laws, all of which can affect levels of physical sensitivity. While these anxieties may manifest in different ways during sex, a good starting point is the acknowledgement, shared by all partners, that it's not always possible to drop these concerns at the bedroom door.

Simply put, if politicians were crusading against sugar cones, it would probably be harder to enjoy your ice cream. And if you were to invite someone to your favorite parlor, it would be helpful to discuss how that hard-line anti-cone agenda might impact your enjoyment.

TOUCH IS EMOTIONAL

Emotion lives in our bodies. Whenever we encounter situations in which we want to cry, scream or simply speak out, we tense up. We clench our jaws, raise our shoulders and squeeze our hands into fists. Years of layered-on tension impact our bodies and our minds. We store the things that happen to us inside ourselves, and even if we're doing the work to exorcise our demons, we're all carrying around a lot of shit—especially when it comes to something as powerful as sex.

Getting touched can arouse feelings ranging from ecstasy to terror, and we may not be intellectually able to name those feelings in the moment; the message can be as primal as "This feels good" or "This feels bad." But however schematic the emotional language may be, it's important to be tuned in to it. When we disregard our feelings or pretend complex emotion isn't possible or allowed during sex, we're setting the stage for miscommunication, or worse.

TOUCH IS INDIVIDUAL

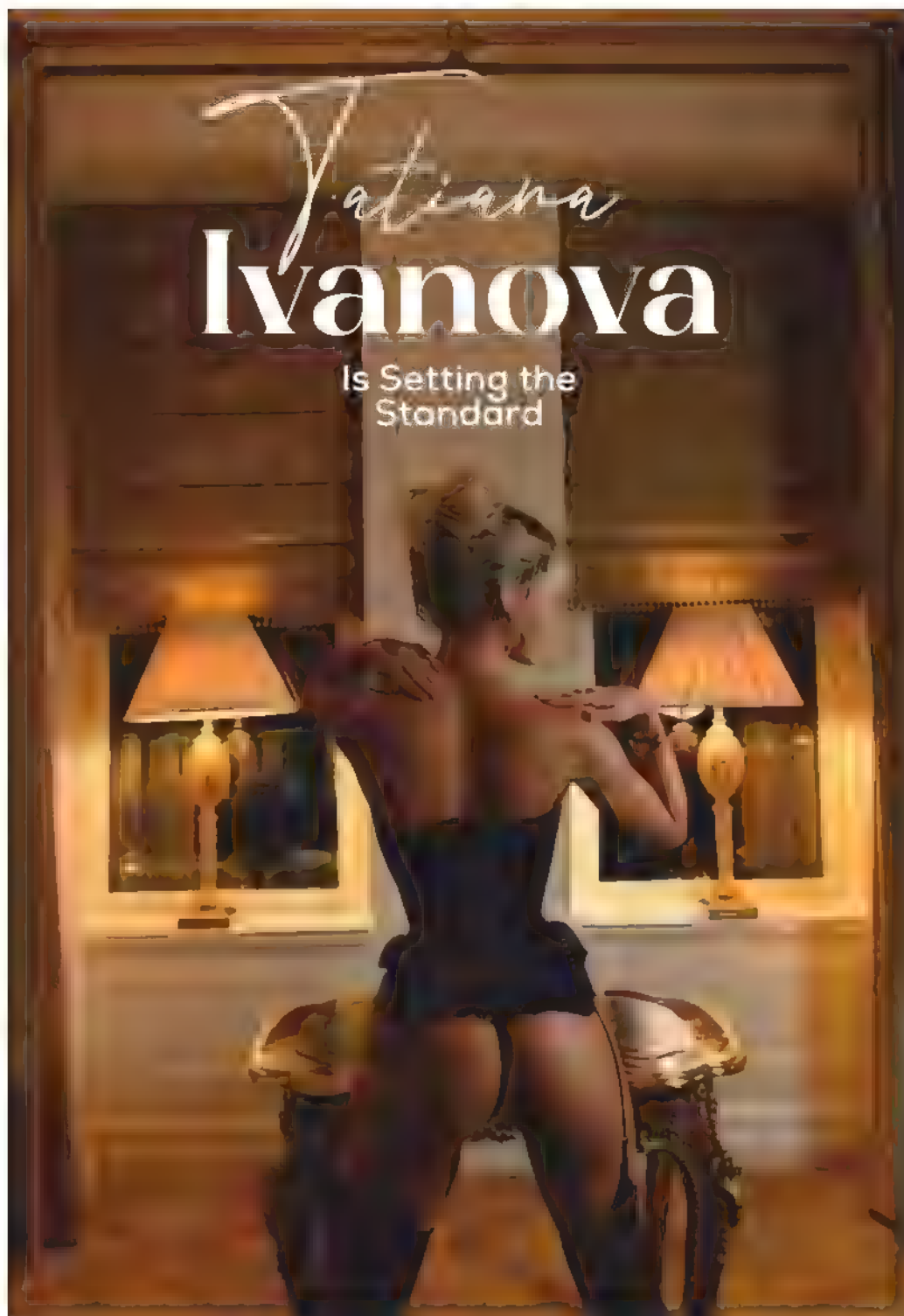
Here's the simplest takeaway of all, reinforced constantly over the four years I spent collecting people's sex stories. The same shit doesn't work on everyone.

We all have different offerings—and allergies—on our sexual menus. It can be maddening to discover that the thing that drove your last partner wild with pleasure disgusts your current bedfellow, but remember that there's joy in the endless variety and potential for experimentation, and that touch can expand and evolve.

Now, I'm not insisting that we over-analyze every erotic insecurity and awkward moment. I'm merely suggesting that we have some baseline compassion and conscience—that we enter sexual scenarios (and, ideally, the spaces that come before them) with the awareness that they take place within a dense ecosystem of personal, cultural and, of course, biological forces.

It's my hope that this awareness will help us all find two things: our voices when touch is uncomfortable, and the freedom to explore all the pleasure touch can bring. ■





Instagram [@ta_tiana2185](#)

Photography by Olga Novikova
, @Olga_Novikova_Work





**Where Did Your Career Begin?**

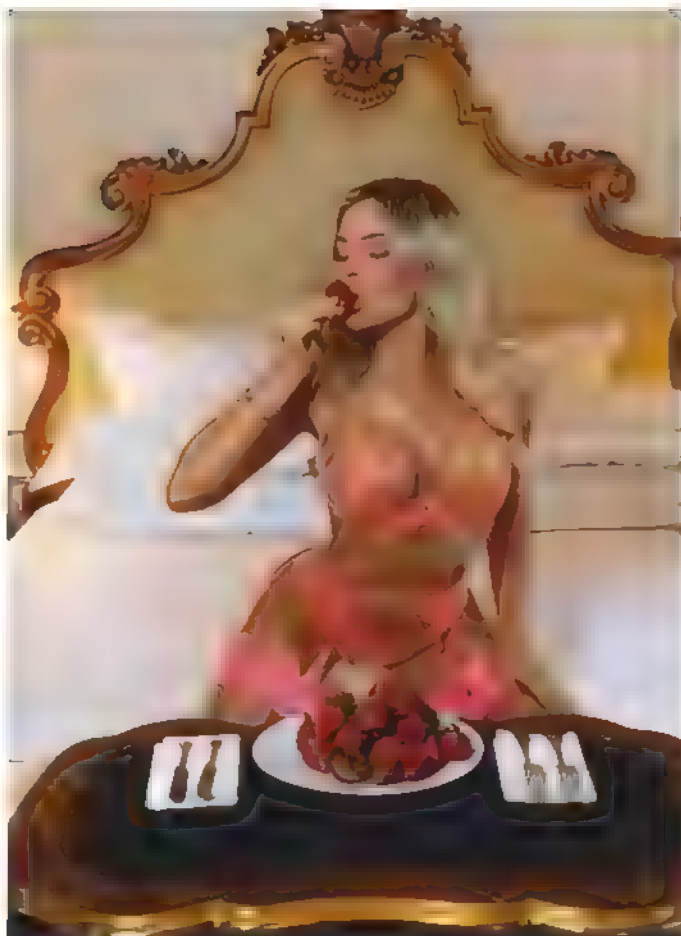
Ah, my career began in the most intriguing and dramatic way I dare say, out of unrequited love. For years I was deeply infatuated with a man twice my age, someone incredibly successful and equally self-absorbed. One day, after yet another conversation where he declared we were not meant to be, I decided to turn my heart-break into fuel. Instead of wallowing, I resolved to conquer the world. And so, rather than winning over the man, I set my sights on something much greater: winning over life itself.

What's the Biggest Misconception People Have About You?

You know the saying: "The greatest misconception women have is, 'He'll change.' And for men, it's, 'She's not going anywhere.'" Well, let me tell you, I'm always going somewhere. Standing still? Not my style. Right now, for instance, I'm conquering New York City. Another misconception stems from my appearance. People see me as a delicate, Nordic blonde with sky-blue eyes and assume fragility. But when I sit down at a chessboard or step onto a tennis court, believe it or not, I have yet to meet a man who can outplay me. So, if you happen to know someone exceptionally intelligent or athletically gifted, tell them to reach out. Perhaps I'll finally find a worthy opponent. Haha.

Hidden Talents? Hmm... Let's just say I have some very well-hidden talents so hidden, in fact, that only my exes know about them. I'm quite talented, I assure you! Maybe one day they'll share those secrets with you. For now, though, they seem to only share them with their new girlfriends.

How Do You Use Your Platform to Inspire Others? I have a suspicion about how I inspire men, but let's leave that without comment, haha. As for women, I motivate them to believe in themselves. Whether it's in a new country, a new environment, or with less-than-



perfect English (which I am improving, I promise!), I show them what determination looks like. Instead of a lazy morning in bed, I choose the gym. Instead of hitting the bar in the evening, I head to yet another casting. And instead of chocolate cake, I opt for a steak. Incidentally, I've also inspired many people to fix their unhealthy eating habits. A year ago, I lost over 15 kilograms by switching to a healthier diet. Now, I share recipes for delicious, low-calorie meals, offer tips on starting a modeling career in the U.S., and, of course, explain how to give your Sims4 character unlimited wealth because why not?

What Message Do You Hope to Convey Through Your Work? You know, it's great to talk about sending messages and changing the world. I'd love to say that my photoshoots will reduce air pollution or inspire people to end wars, but let's be honest, that's not the case. I simply love what I do and truly enjoy every moment of it. Sometimes, you don't need to carry a grand universal mission; carrying your own personal one and simply being happy is more than enough.

How Do You Mentally Prepare for a Big Photoshoot? It's not so much

about mentally preparing for a big photoshoot; it's more about mentally preparing for the lack of one, especially with Manhattan rent prices, haha. On a serious note, I cut out alcohol and carbs a few days before an important shoot. I've never tortured myself with extreme diets, like surviving on juices for a week, but sticking to protein meat, fish, eggs—for a couple of days is no trouble at all.

When You're Not Working, What Helps You Relax?

Mastering the art of relaxation is a real superpower. I believe it's an essential part of any profession; it keeps you productive, energized, and looking your best, which is especially important for models (and honestly, wouldn't hurt businesspeople either!). Personally,

my friends and I have a fantastic tradition: every weekend, we visit a new and unique restaurant. Luckily, Manhattan offers endless options. Last week, I dined at a Michelin-starred spot serving Norwegian cuisine. Next on the list? A New Zealand restaurant I've been dreaming of trying. Hāngi for ages.

One of the Most Memorable Moments?

One that stands out was when, amidst a crowd of fans, a man approached me, handed me a bracelet from a well-known brand (with a five-figure price tag, no less), and disappeared. I don't know his name or the reason for this extravagant gesture, but Secret Santa, if you're reading this, thank you! And if you ever feel like gifting me something else, don't hold back.

What Would You Take to a Deserted Island?

Just a rubber duck. Everything else I need is in my head. Tatiana, 23, Sagittarius, living my best life in the heart of New York City. Currently studying at an English language school in Manhattan. An art historian by education and a future Egyptologist. A passionate lover of scientific literature and sci-fi.







THE PLAYBOY SYM POS IUM

Is Hollywood keeping up with the changing mores of contemporary sexuality? In a time of simultaneous sex positivity and panic, we wanted to investigate how moviemakers are handling our country's sexual reawakening—especially when it comes to female sexuality on the big screen. So we tapped Franklin Leonard—founder of the Black List, Hollywood's heralded community of screenwriters and script buyers—for some help. What follows is a titillating survey of sex, cinema and the female gaze by the Black List's director of community, Kate Hagen. Accompanying Hagen's words: three never-beforepublished illustrations by artists exploring the act of sex, hand-selected by digital gallerist Love Watts.

WORDS BY **KATE HAGEN**

ART CREATED BY **LOVE WATTS**

How were you first seduced by cinema?

My relationship with film began long before I could name the mesmeric desire I felt every time I turned myself over to 100 minutes of flickering passion on the screen. It wasn't until adolescence, when I started to actively seek out any movie on cable with a strong sexual content warning, that my nascent affection for film blossomed into an eternal obsession. And once I was finally left alone to watch what I wanted, I became a cinematic-sex sleuth.

I sought movies such as *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, *Bound*, *Wild at Heart*, *The Last Seduction* and *Crash* (David Cronenberg's version, of course) solely for the sex. I became entranced not only with thrillingly new perspectives on romance, relationships and intimacy but with the complex emotional narratives around them. I became addicted to the nervous fluttering in my belly when the camera pushed in on two faces I loved, their bodies clutched in electrified anticipation before a climactic fuck. I perfected the art of searching *TV Guide* listings by actor to find the finest filth the Encore Romance channel could offer on a Saturday afternoon. (Remember *Damage* with Jeremy Irons and Juliette Binoche?) I spent hours of trigonometry class daydreaming about whichever actor beguiled me at the moment. That complete list is unfit to print in any medium, but I will admit I was hot for Alan Ruck long before *Succession*.

Even now, nothing thrills me more than a great sex scene. The problem is, the steamiest sex I've seen in years, outside of porn, occurred in the sixth episode of HBO's *Euphoria* not in a theater. With its tender, trembling Halloween tryst between the characters played by Barbie Ferreira and Austin Abrams, *Euphoria* gave me something I'd never seen before, even as a slut for cinematic smut: a fat woman receiving oral pleasure to the point of climax without it being a punch line or a punishment for her or her paramour. While I was thrilled to be consumed by a scene starring someone who looks like me, it reminded me how long it had been since I'd seen a film that made me feel even remotely the same way.

A spectacular sex scene appeals to our lusting lizard brains, but everything that unfolds around the fucking is what invites audience members to invest and empathize with the characters: the tight clasp of Linda Hamilton's and Michael Biehn's hands during their pivotal coupling in *The Terminator*, or the sobering POV shots as Jennifer Jason Leigh bids adieu to her virginity in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. Through sex, we're able to gaze at our most beloved stars during moments of exceptional vulnerability, allowing deeper emotional connections — ones that can validate our own desires.

My love for on-screen erotica made me open to a variety of sexual perspectives long before I could experience them in reality. Even so, it took me three decades to feel represented sexually in film. If the most ubiquitous form of storytelling doesn't feature people to whom we can relate in their enjoyment of carnal satisfaction, how could we ever feel worthy of such a thing in real life? How could we believe we should ask for it?

I've been troubled by the state of sex in movies for the past few years. My fears are confirmed by data from IMDb: Only 1.21 percent of the 148,012 feature-length films released since 2010

contain depictions of sex. That percentage is the lowest since the 1960s. Sex in cinema peaked in the 1990s, the heyday of the erotic thriller, with 1.79 percent of all films featuring sex scenes. That half-point decline is massive in relative terms, considering almost four times as many films have been released in the 2010s as in the 1990s.

Studio releases simply aren't keeping up with the conversations about sex, gender and relationships that have been amplified by Generation Z's progressive attitudes and a #MeToo-driven cultural reckoning. Mainstream film surely isn't representative of the kinds of love and sex I experience in my life as a bisexual woman. We've only begun to flirt with respectful depictions of queer sex, kink and sex work on-screen, but those stories often live and die in the art houses. Countless nuanced perspectives remain unexplored by studios.

As I investigated the state of sex in cinema, I became frustrated with the attempts to assign blame for the slump. Scapegoats include the rise of streaming tube sites and smartphone dependence. But like the complexities of human attraction, the factors that led to the decline of sex in movies are intertwined with our own media history — both as individual viewers and as a collective audience that isn't getting laid as often as we did 20 years ago.

According to a November 2017 article in *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, American adults had sex about nine fewer times per year in the early 2010s than adults in the late 1990s. A 2016 LinkedIn study determined that entertainment is the top industry for young workers, which suggests we may be seeing less sex at the movies because Hollywood is full of undersexed millennials. (And why not blame another cultural catastrophe on millennials?) But that theory falls apart when you consider that the six major studios are run by baby boomers and Gen-Xers — who reportedly have more sex than the younger cohort. If industry gatekeepers are so sexually active, shouldn't there be more sex on release slates?

Consider the most successful erotic thriller ever made: Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction*, which grossed more than \$155 million domestically and was nominated for six Academy Awards, including best picture, in 1987. With its chaotic sex, Oscar-nominated performance from Glenn Close ("I won't be ignored, Dan" still haunts me) and controversial climax, *Fatal Attraction* gained the kind of cultural ubiquity now reserved for franchises and IP-driven tentpoles, not middle-budget adult dramas.

To further contextualize *Fatal Attraction*'s success, its adjusted domestic box office is nearly \$360 million. If released in 2019, it would be the year's sixth-highest-grossing domestic release, behind four Disney films and one Sony/Marvel/Disney crossover. There's simply no way a movie like *Fatal Attraction*, with its languorous erotic intrigue and troubling morality, could compete with a Marvel giant in our current landscape, nor gain the same awards heat.

Beyond stories with explicit eroticism, five of the 100 all-time highest domestic grossers — *Avatar*, *Titanic*, *Deadpool*, *Forrest*

Gump, Skyfall and Twilight: Breaking Dawn—Part 2 feature depictions of sex. At five percent, this list over-indexes when compared with the percentage of sex scenes in all movies, but with alien sex, superhero sex and vampire sex, these movies are not representative of anyone's sexual experiences (I imagine). What's more, not a single female director is responsible for these titles.

The exceptions to the major studios' sex strike are the adaptations of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, EL James's problematic fantasy about the luxury of heteronormative submission. The first *Fifty Shades* film and the only one lensed by a woman, Sam Taylor-Johnson grossed more than 10 times its \$40 million budget. In total, all three films in the franchise made more than \$1.3 billion worldwide, without showing a single penis.

Given the paucity of narratives about sexual fantasies centered on female desire, I can appreciate how the series pushed the envelope. But can the chemistry between Dakota Johnson and Jamie Dornan begin to compare with the incendiary attraction between Clooney and Michael Douglas? Pushing even further, the last notable theatrical release to receive an NC-17 rating was 2013's *Blue Is the Warmest Color*. Scenes of graphic unsimulated sex, such as those in *Anatomy of Hell* and *Nymphomaniac*, remain the territory of auteurs and international filmmakers who can leverage critical clout to get into festivals. Such releases sometimes make it to streaming platforms (for example, Gaspar Noé's *Love*, now on Netflix), but they aren't the cinephilic fodder they were just a decade ago.

As streaming platforms continue to dominate, new possibilities for adult content are emerging. Amazon's Jennifer Salke has partnered with Nicole Kidman to create a new house brand of "sexy date night" movies for Prime members. We have to consider that one of most plausible explanations for the cinematic-sex decline is the increase in sex on television. Should you ask your friends about their favorite recent depictions of sex, I imagine most will reference the small screen. Sex has made shows such as *Vida*, *Outlander*, *Euphoria* and *Pose* must-see television. The discourse around TV's steamiest moments—from bold thirst tweets to erotic GIFs—feels more pervasive than any cultural conversation about sex in film.

If we're living in the era of peak TV, shouldn't that suggest peak TV sex? Despite the earlier examples, not quite. Since 2000, sex scenes on television have tripled—to 0.06 percent. From 2010 to 2019, the percentage of movies with sex scenes was 20 times that of TV shows, at a time when television production outpaced film production by a ratio of about 13 to one. If we look back to the 1990s, the so-called peak decade for movie sex, data show that sex in film outpaced sex on TV by a staggering rate of about 60 to one.

While there may be more sex on TV today compared with 2000, the halcyon days of XXX late-night programming have come to

an end. In 2018, HBO pulled *Cathouse*, *Real Sex* and other adult programming from its broadcast and streaming services. This summer, the world lost erotic pioneer Patricia Louisiana Knop, who, along with her life and business partner, Zalman King, produced a carousel of pay-cable carnality throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Together they created the lushest sexual-fantasy films to hit the mainstream, including *9½ Weeks*, *Two Moon Junction* and *Wild Orchid*, plus *Red Shoe Diaries*, which premiered on Showtime in 1992.

Red Shoe Diaries focused on the complexities of desire in a patriarchal, post-AIDS world. Bounty hunters, architects and doctors narrated their own stories of "love, passion, and betrayal" in letters sent to Red Shoes (played by David Duchovny), a wounded lothario who gets his kicks from their lurid tales. To kids of the 1990s, *Red Shoe Diaries* evokes sexy, synthwave role-play scenarios sponsored by Spencer's Gifts. But I would argue it had more progressive, thoughtful explorations of passion in its first season

than in any premium-cable series since. It wasn't surprising, then, when I learned the show was produced in part by women, as was *Real Sex*. In the quarter-century since Knop and King's series debuted, we haven't come far in our depictions of non-heterosexual, non-vanilla sex in popular entertainment—or, more specifically, popular entertainment that isn't pornography.

I will admit cinematic sex satisfied my voyeurism only until I discovered the work of adult maven Joanna Angel, a former sex-advice columnist for *Spin*. Angel's brand of altporn features goth babes of all sizes along with approachable hunks such as Tommy Pistol. Through her Burning Angel banner, I realized that porn could be much more than vapid nymphets and hung studs, especially with a woman in the director's chair.

Porn has always occupied a different part of my imagination than movie sex; the adult industry has its own celebrities, awards circuit and cinematic language that is both reflective of and totally unlike Hollywood. Equating the two industries undermines the talented performers in both worlds.

Hollywood's influence, and its current failure to present diverse perspectives on pleasure, is apparent on Adult Time, a paid subscription streaming service that bills itself as the Netflix of porn. Featuring more than 100 curated channels and 50,000 videos, Adult Time is the branchchild of Bree Mills, a queer female pornographer whose work includes everything from a lesbian-themed *Miami Vice* homage to a trans reimagining of *Thelma & Louise* to a kinky parody of the musical *Annie*.

Signing up for a trial of Adult Time this spring was the most revelatory experience I've had with porn since discovering Burning Angel. There, I watched real bodies—bodies with acne, cellulite and stretch marks; bodies historically valued

To deny the essential role of sex in cinema is to deny a core truth.

as less than desirable in mainstream storytelling of all kinds; bodies denied on-screen pleasure in Hollywood as well as adult films — experiencing real bliss. Scouring Adult Time's library, which includes thousands of scenes from porn's golden age, it's apparent there are more inclusive, feminine gazes in adult content than ever before. You just have to be willing to look beyond Pornhub.

More than half the nominees for best director at the 2019 XBIZ Awards were women, which represents far more gender diversity than any directing category during major awards season. Since the 1990s peak of cinematic sex, porn made for, by and about women (and trans, nonbinary and other gender-nonconforming folks) has unquestionably improved and diversified. This was long overdue, and I wouldn't trade porn's progress for better Hollywood-produced erotica, but mainstream filmmakers could learn how to frame, block and light cinematic sex scenes from Adult Time.

Depending on whom you ask, valuations of the global adult industry range from \$5 billion to \$97 billion. Pornhub reported 33.5 billion global visits in 2018; if we compare this to 2018's global box office returns of \$41.7 billion (assuming the average movie ticket costs \$10), we can estimate that about 4 billion movie tickets were sold in the same time frame. Adult industry aggregator MindGeek (which owns Pornhub, Redtube and YouPorn, among other sites) is currently mining millions of data points from users to craft new content by algorithm, just as Netflix did with *Maniac* and *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*. Whether this optimized adult content resonates with viewers is yet to be seen, but for me, returning to the Wild West of free pornography after my Adult Time trial felt like eating Vienna sausage after two weeks of bingeing Wagyu beef.

Innovations in the adult industry have also created new technological concerns for any performer who appears nude or simulates sex. A Pandora's box of deepfake videos and other nascent forms of digital manipulation popped open around 2017 and immediately became popular as a way to reimagine adult content. On Pornhub, a search for "deepfakes" yields no results, but on Redtube and YouPorn, a dozen videos, each buried deep within the uncanny valley, surface. They became harder to watch with each frame, but one clip in particular, starring a superheroine, shook me to my core. If I didn't know better, it would be difficult to believe it was fake.

For now, the celebrity deepfake market seems focused on exploiting women. When I searched through one such site, not a single video starred a male actor. Female nudity in film has plummeted since its peak of appearing in about six percent of all films in the 1990s to less than three percent of all films in the past 20 years. This still eclipses male nudity, rarely fullfrontal, which appears in only 1.67 percent of all films since 1950. The imbalance of gendered nude scenes was promoted in DeepNude, an app launched last summer that virtually undressed women using neural network technology from online nude photos. While DeepNude was taken down within a day, and measures such as California's proposed SB 564 (backed by the Screen Actors Guild) could prohibit the creation and sharing of digitally rendered sex scenes without the performers' consent, no single federal law protects against deepfake pornography.

The war over how our most intimate moments are digitally disseminated will be waged in our lifetime, with private citizens soon to face the same concerns as celebrities when it comes to how they're represented online. In the meantime, Hollywood has responded to performers' concerns about filming sex scenes with the creation of a new crew position: the intimacy coordinator. Just as stunt coordinators ensure that a balletic action sequence won't injure actors, an intimacy coordinator ensures that actors feel safe and comfortable while filming intimate scenes.

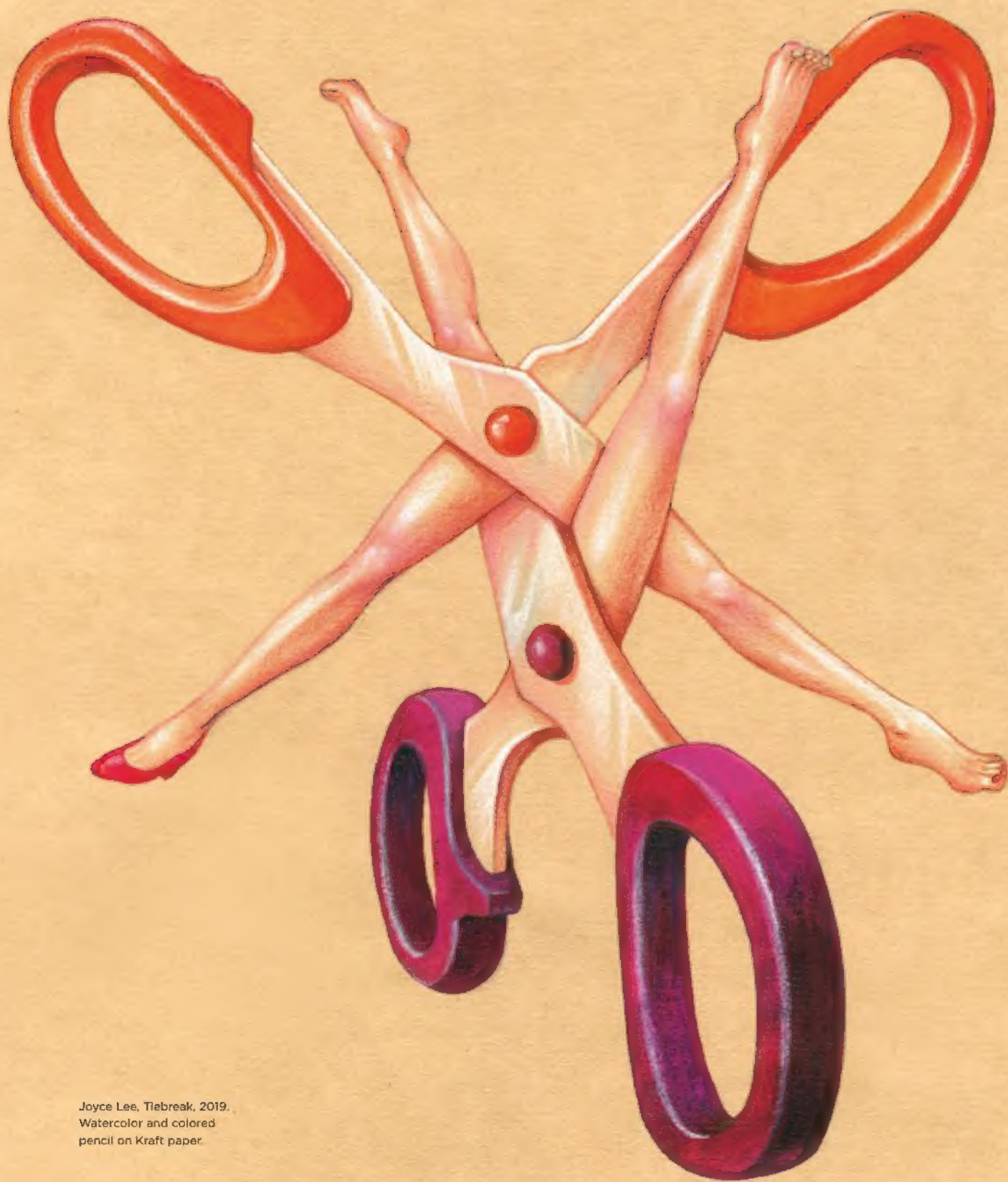
Alicia Rodis, co-founder of Intimacy Directors International, is currently working with SAG-AFTRA to create guidelines for shooting sex scenes while overseeing the sets of shows like *The Deuce*. *Euphoria*'s intimacy coordinator, Amanda Blumenthal, no doubt had a hand in creating the scene between Ferreira and Abrams that had me scouring Tumblr like it was 2007. With the off-age actors playing high school juniors, the scene could have read as exploitative or gratuitous. Instead — thanks to Blumenthal's presence, I imagine — their coupling felt raw and relatable. It thrilled me on a visceral level.

When I was the age of Ferreira's character on *Euphoria*, I was terrified someone would find out about my film-sex fascination. I didn't want to be the stereotypical hypersexual fat woman, who'd been revealed to me in films like *Road Trip* as the only option for my sexuality. As I've grown more comfortable with my sexuality (and seen it reflected in *Shrill*, *My Mad Fat Diary* and other media), I feel grateful for my early erotic adventures across the cinematic canon. Through all sorts of viewing I learned to appreciate every subtle gesture of affection between two actors pretending to be in love, and I came to crave the tactile, electrifying intimacy captured by films such as *The Piano* and *Morvern Callar*.

The feelings-first fervor from my adolescence never fully dissipated. I still seek sex scenes that challenge what I think I want from romance, especially as my own sexual spectrum continues to expand. Hollywood may be failing when it comes to depicting the many facets of contemporary sexuality, but we have also moved beyond the regressive sexual politics of *Manhattan* and *Disclosure* (think *Tangerine*, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* and *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women*). As more women step behind the camera, we could soon see sex scenes from radical new perspectives that will shift how we think about sex at the movies forever — as long as Hollywood is willing to showcase them.

When we talk about diverse and inclusive storytelling, it must include depictions of our sexual lives and desires. To deny the essential role of sex in cinema is to deny a core truth about why we watch in the first place: desire. Desire to live a more thrilling life. Desire to experience something that fascinates us but is too frightening to touch in the real world. Whether we admit it or not, this is what keeps us coming back to the cinema. Great sex scenes project the secret, unspoken desires hiding in a viewer's heart onto a screen in front of them. Sex at the cinema has taught me more about my own desires than I could ever have imagined. I can't wait to be surprised and shocked by the next era. ■

Opposite page: Laura Berger, Flower, 2019. Acrylic on canvas.



Joyce Lee, Tiebreak, 2019.
Watercolor and colored
pencil on Kraft paper.

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